

Chapter One

Strange Happenings

As a new day began to rise upon the horizon, a ray of sunshine sneaked through a window into Hogwarts' Infirmary, slowly warming the cold stones of the castle floor. A lone raven perched itself atop a window sill as if it were happy just to be able to fly on that bright morning. Spreading its wings, the bird dug its beak into them, carefully tending its feathers, basking delightedly in the new day's warmth. An occasional cough, whimper and a hurried swish of a cloak perturbed the otherwise silent Infirmary; a sanctuary to those who had been wounded in the final battle.

It was peaceful and quiet; the Infirmary lay there as an alternate world, oblivious to the raucous party that was being celebrated outside its protective walls. The people inside either slept peacefully, uttered feeble moans of pain or simply didn't move or breathe at all.

The most unusual thing about the Infirmary on that June morning, even stranger than the random and colourful jets of light the matron produced with a wand, was a tabby, strict-looking cat that was unmoving next to a boy's bed, sitting on a white and uncomfortable stool. The cat kept its eyes fixed on its surroundings, varying between the sleeping boy and the rest of the Hospital Wing, inconspicuously denying entrance to almost anyone who sought to wake the boy.

The way in which the feline looked at the sleeping figure would make anyone believe it was human, for in those eyes one could see affection, admiration, angst and many other feelings so acute that no animal could ever dream of having. Only the footsteps of a pair of hurried feet made the cat raise its head, ready to bite and scratch the curious people who wanted to visit the boy. As it realised the approaching figure was none other than the Hogwarts' matron, it let out the breath that it had been unwittingly holding.

‘Still sleeping, I suppose?’ the nurse asked.

Where a cat had been, now stood a tall, proud and stern woman; still sitting on the same uncomfortable stool. ‘Yes, he hasn’t woken up at all.’

The nurse sighed in defeat, waving her wand around the unconscious teen, soft golden glows emitting from his body. ‘I still can’t understand anything about what has happened to him,’ she whispered, annoyed, as she held his head with one arm and made him drink a nasty-looking potion with her right hand. ‘I mean, he miraculously comes back to life when all of the Death Eaters and Him thought him dead – and we all know what must’ve happened for them to think that; he does the impossible by defeating You-Know-Who, and then, two hours later, Merlin knows why, he suddenly collapses and has been knocked out for three days,’ she finished, completely confused. Pushing the bangs away from the peaceful teen’s face, the matron narrowed her eyes and said in a barely audible tone, ‘and that’s not all. I have been checking his magical levels, fearing that his situation might be due to magical exhaustion, but it seems that Mr Potter here has once again broken all the rules -’

‘What do you mean by that, Poppy?’ Professor McGonagall asked sharply, tearing her eyes from the steady rise and fall of his breathing chest.

The matron sighed again, exhausted. ‘His magic hasn’t been compromised at all; actually, up until now, it has tripled, and we all know this boy was never a squib.’

Professor McGonagall’s eyes were fixed on her, wide-open in disbelief. ‘B-but surely y-you must have made a mistake running the tests -’

Madam Pomfrey shook her head glumly. 'At first, I thought that I had done something wrong, but after repeating the same process another five times, I had to admit that what I was seeing was, in fact, accurate. By Merlin, what runs through Mr Potter's veins isn't blood, it's pure magic!'

There were few things that could surprise Professor McGonagall; the strict, stern and fair Transfiguration teacher for nearly half a century, and one of those things just happened to be the sleeping teenager in front of her. 'But – how?' she sputtered.

'I don't know,' the matron answered dejectedly, rubbing her temples, 'I simply can't explain the how, I only know it's the truth; it's as if something had been holding back his raw magical power, and then, just as unexpectedly, it has been unleashed,' she muttered, more to herself than to the professor, still trying to make any sense out of it.

'So you might think the demise -?'

Madam Pomfrey nodded her head. 'Yes, but I don't know why. And this has nothing to do with what a wizard goes through when he turns of age, his powers haven't been blocked, they've simply been multiplying themselves!'

Unbeknownst to them, the boy they were talking about wasn't sleeping at all; he was, in fact, very much awake and as puzzled and confused as the two women.

'I'll have a talk with Albus's portrait, see if he can throw some light on the matter, because I am completely at a loss as to why this has happened,' said Professor McGonagall, her brain coming up with hundreds of ideas, each one as unlikely as the next.

The matron walked away, her mind set on tending her other patients while the professor glanced warmly at Harry, waving her right arm at

a pile of very much disorganised presents and tokens from his well-wishers, organising the mounting heap of gifts.

‘So young,’ she muttered sadly, gazing intently upon the boy on the bed. She raised an arm and moved his unruly hair off his face, her heart constricting at the sight of her student. The boy had been many times in the Infirmary; Merlin, so many that he should even have a private bed for his own, the number of times he had been injured. And yet, she’d never seen him like she saw him then, a solid and tough but young and innocent warrior.

She didn’t want to wake him up, and yet, she knew she had to. How much she hated sometimes being in charge. ‘Harry, please wake up.’

Knowing that Professor McGonagall was not a woman who did things without a good reason, he thought it best to stop pretending to be asleep. Yawning slightly, Harry opened his eyes faking grogginess, reaching out to grab his glasses. ‘Yes, professor?’

She wriggled her hands uncomfortably; she was not going to enjoy delivering the news. ‘How are you feeling?’

‘I’m fine, professor,’ answered Harry nonplussed, sensing as if his Transfiguration teacher was procrastinating.

Some of his confusion must’ve shown on his face, because just as soon as he had replied, Professor McGonagall started talking again, her voice being at the same time gentle and business-like manner. ‘I am very sorry to tell you that the Ministry – what’s left of it – is getting restless; they want you to give a full testimony of what you’ve been doing these past months and especially what happened a few nights ago,’ she said as quick as possible.

Feigning confusion, Harry asked. ‘A few nights ago?’

McGonagall sighed. ‘Yes, you fainted shortly after you defeated

He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. What happened to you?’

‘I dunno. I just sort of felt like some sudden spurge through my veins, and that’s all I can remember,’ Harry answered embarrassed.

‘Yes, that brings me to another bizarre topic,’ she said, rubbing her temples tiredly. And so, she told him about his sudden increase of raw magical power, about their surprise at something like that happening because it was something completely unheard of, she hypothesised it was the reason he’d fainted, but all in all, no-one was any wiser. ‘And it’s not similar to what happens when a wizard becomes seventeen.’

Not faking this time his confusion, Harry asked, ‘er, what happens when a wizard turns seventeen?’

Professor McGonagall looked at him sharply, as if trying to figure out if he was being dumb on purpose or genuinely ignorant of the wizarding ways. ‘You are telling me, Mr Potter, that you didn’t feel anything different on your last birthday?’

Quite uneasily, Harry replied. ‘Er, no, I felt the same way only I was from then on allowed to perform magic outside the school without receiving any of Mafalda Hopkirk’s letters.’

‘Have you never wondered why adulthood in the wizarding world is reached at the age of seventeen and not later, when the wizard or witch is more emotionally mature?’

Apparently, Harry learnt from the Transfiguration teacher that a wizard became an adult at seventeen because it was when he reached his full powers; when he was supposed to be completely able of controlling his powers and therefore preventing outbursts of accidental and nasty piece of magic. It was at that moment when the blocks that were placed naturally since the wizard was conceived were lifted. But he, Harry, had to be yet again an exception.

‘Because not only that event did not happen last July the thirty-first, but your raw magical power has increased instead of being unblocked. I don’t suppose you have any thoughts as to why this may have happened?’

Millions of theories ran through Harry’s brain, and yet, all of them seemed completely laughable... all, except one; but that sole idea was so nasty and it brought back such horrible memories that he didn’t want to be right on that one.

He didn’t know whether to tell McGonagall about it, it had been a matter between Dumbledore and himself after all. Still, he thought that if she was thrown in the secret of the almost impossible task the former Headmaster had left him to do; she may understand better where he came from and maybe help him get out of the Ministry’s clutches. Making up his mind, he went to grab his wand.

‘Mr Potter – what are you doing?’

‘I need to cast a Privacy Charm,’ he whispered.

Understanding dawned on her face and she put an arm over his and performed the spell herself, making sure there was no way anyone could overhear or eavesdrop on them. ‘Your magic will be unstable before you learn how to control it,’ she explained.

Harry nodded and suddenly his voice turned from being fairly pleasant to strict and commanding, ‘do I have your word that what I am about to tell you will not leave this room?’

She narrowed her eyes at him for a fleeting instant, but before he knew it, she raised her wand and pointed it at her heart. ‘I, Minerva Gwendolyn McGonagall swear upon my magic that what Harry James Potter is about to confide in me shall never be willingly told be me to any other living being,’ she said as her wand produced some

golden rays around her before everything was back to normal.

Not expecting a formal Wizard's Oath but thoroughly satisfied, Harry sighed tiredly and inquired. 'What do you know about Horcruxes, professor?'

And so Harry told her how it all began with the infamous diary in his second year, the diary enchanted to possess anyone who wrote on it, about Professor Dumbledore's suspicions about what it really was. He told her about the ring and that it somehow cursed Dumbledore's hand when he destroyed it, omitting the fact of what the ring truly was. He told her about the next Horcrux, the locket, but when he reached the point where it had turned out to be a

fake one, his voice constricted. Allowing himself a few seconds to steady his voice, he continued, trying very hard not to join his teacher's tears. He told her about Kreacher, Regulus Black and the real locket in Umbridge's possession, satisfied when he saw her angered at the former High Inquisitor being hexed, he told her about the doe patronus, the Gryffindor Sword, Hufflepuff's cup at Gringotts, the dragon ride, Ravenclaw's diadem, Nagini...

Professor McGonagall was a terrific audience, she knew when to gasp, when to cry, when to smile, and yet she barely ever interrupted him. 'But, Harry, what does this thing have to do with you and your increased powers?' she asked blankly.

Harry smiled sadly. 'What Voldemort was never aware of is that, the night he went to kill me, he unwittingly created another Horcrux.'

Her eyes went wide-open in horror as she understood what she was being told.

'Yes – I was a Horcrux.'

'But how did you get rid of it?'

Shaking his head at his teacher's confused behaviour, he said 'by surviving again the Killing Curse.'

By her reaction, he knew that she wasn't expecting that. So he launched on a brief explanation about meeting Voldemort, fully aware that he had to sacrifice himself in order to defeat the Dark Lord, but coming back to life seconds later, having miraculously succeeded in expelling the Horcrux out of him and surviving. He told her he thought, thought rather than knew, that he hadn't been killed this time because his blood and his mother's protection resided in Voldemort's body since his resurrection. He was positive he wasn't immune to the Killing Curse, but that he wasn't willing to prove his thoughts about that particular subject right.

'So, basically, the Horcrux in me may have been poisoning me, just as much as my blood may have been poisoning Voldemort,' he finished.

Professor McGonagall looked as if she'd just swallowed a very sour lemon and Harry had to fight the urge to laugh at her comical expression. It stopped being funny, however, after ten minutes of utter silence.

'Professor?'

Shaking a little, she raised her voice, 'right. Don't worry I shall never utter a single word about this in all my life, and if I have to, I shall curse half of the Ministry if they get too nosy,' she said, seeing Harry's eyes cloud in anger.

'Those pompous gits will never be told about this! I don't want anyone getting ideas about Voldemort's Horcruxes!' he said fiercely.

'I know, Harry, believe me I know. However something must be done about it; but time is against us and I don't think I'll be able to delay

them summoning you much longer, and although Kingsley is doing his best to appease them, he isn't Merlin or Albus Dumbledore.

'On another note, I wanted to talk to you about two other things. Firstly, when you faced You-Know- oh, alright, Voldemort – you talked about Severus Snape.'

'In the end, he was on our side; Dumbledore did have an iron-clad reason to believe his loyalty towards him,' Harry interrupted her. 'There's a pensive in your office, use it and you'll see exactly why Dumbledore believed him. Just don't think too badly about him after seeing those memories.'

After shooting him an inquiring look, she continued talking. 'So I suppose he should receive a proper burial?'

Harry nodded his head vigorously. 'Snape was a complete git and everyone knows we despised each other; but I swear that if he hadn't been such a sly imbecile, he should have been a Gryffindor. I reckon he should be buried next to Dumbledore, just as he would've wanted.'

'You are going to have a difficult time with that,' she warned.

'Yes, I suppose. But maybe being the Boy-Who-Lived, the Chosen One and the Boy-Who-Conquered or whatever people call me these days will help me with it.'

'I'm certain it will,' she said with a wry smile. 'I'll make sure his body is separated from the rest of the dead Death Eaters' bodies,' she added and Harry nodded.

'Secondly, I wanted to tell you about Voldemort's body.'

Harry arched an eyebrow questioningly. 'What about it?'

‘Well, it – it happens to be impossible to approach it or destroy it, so many of us think that you must be the one to get rid of it,’ she told him apologetically.

‘Oh, alright. As soon as Madam Pomfrey lets me out I will do it.’

She smiled at him again and rose to leave, lifting all the Privacy and Repelling Charms around his bed. ‘Thank you, Harry.’

And with that, Professor McGonagall left as the matron approached him, potions and remedies in her hands, leaving Harry with some very disturbing thoughts.

-oOoOoOoOo-

Evening found Harry opening the doors of the Infirmary, ready to leave and ready to dispose of what was left of Tom Marvolo Riddle, more commonly known as Lord Voldemort. Walking through them, he cast on himself a Disillusionment Charm to avoid unwanted attention. Careful not to bump into the students that were patrolling the corridors, probably wanting to go and see the Great Harry Potter, he walked his way to the Gryffindor common room, hoping that he would find Ron and Hermione there.

Twice he nearly crashed into two groups of giggling girls. In Harry’s opinion, giggling should be banned. He had never been able to puzzle girls out; maybe he would ask Ginny about it sometime later, because everyone knew that Hermione was just too weird.

At the thought of Ginny, Harry’s heart skipped a beat. What would he do, now the threat of having her snatched away by Voldemort was over? Would she still want him? Would she have moved on? As egoistically as it sounded to himself, Harry had never wanted her to move on; but, then again, he had never expected to be able to survive the war. So now that he was free to do whatever he pleased,

would she still take him?

Harry shook his head, cursing himself for letting his hopes soar. He would have to talk to Ginny eventually, but not today. Today and from then on he had to let her see that he trusted her, he must tell her, just as he had told McGonagall, what he had been up to. It was only fair for her to know if he wanted to continue a relationship with her.

Then, as the thought crossed his mind, he suddenly stopped, and had to hold onto all of his will not to jump in glee. No more secrets! No more lies!

Of course, he couldn't just tell everyone in the wizarding world about his quest; although for another wizard like Voldemort an extraordinary amount of magical power was needed, nothing stopped Dark Lord-wannabes to try and make themselves Horcruxes, and that was something that had to be avoided at all costs. Well, he had told McGonagall, and maybe he would have to clue Kingsley in, seeing as he was acting Minister for Magic at the moment, but Ginny just had to know it.

Thanking his Seeker reflexes, Harry stepped away avoiding the impending crash with a bunch of Gryffindor boys that had just stepped out of the portrait hole. Before the portrait could resume its former position blocking the entrance of the Gryffindor common room, Harry quickly climbed through it and walked into the room. Looking around, he saw that nothing had changed drastically; at least the décor hadn't, but he noticed that the air around him was a lot less tense and that the students there were laughing and joking with mirth carelessly because the

war was over. After a quick scan around the room, he realised that neither Ron nor Hermione were there, and he thought that they might be on the boys' dorm, hopefully not doing anything that would scar Harry for life.

He approached the door gingerly and pressed his ear against it, trying to hear any sound in the room. He sighed in relief; if they were there, they didn't appear to be doing any improper activities. Lifting the Disillusionment Charm off himself, he opened the door slowly, peeking inside.

After a quick glance, he saw that the dorm was empty. Huffing in frustration, he sat on the edge of Ron's bed. All of the hangings were open except for what would have been his seventh-year four-poster, which had all its hangings drawn close. Since Ron had probably slept in his dorm lately, and Seamus and Neville had been at Hogwarts all year around, it was normal they were both open. He was curious, however, as to why Dean's bed had its sheets piled in a mess, since he had not been at school that year to begin with. He shuddered at the thought of what might have been happening inside the boys' dormitory while he hadn't been there. He only hoped his bed was still blissfully unaware of the physical action that may happen between a boy and a girl.

Standing up, he scratched his head and willed himself to leave. 'Where the blazes are they?' he muttered.

Suddenly and unexpectedly, he heard something moving behind him and spun on his heels, casting the wand towards his bed, where the sound had come from.

Totally unprepared for it, he saw in slow motion as the curtains from his four-poster opened only to reveal a very dishevelled girl inside, Ginny.

Lowering his wand, he looked at her, confused. 'Gin, what -'

But before he ever finished the sentence, he was tackled to the ground by her tight embrace and landed quite unceremoniously on his backside, unable to respond.

He didn't know how, or when, or even why, but just unexpectedly as he'd discovered her to be on his bed, he found himself kissing her with a force he had never thought he had. Pulling her even closer to him, he realised how much he had missed her and wondered how on earth he had managed to convince himself he could ever give up on what they were doing at the moment.

Although slim and petite, Ginny had him totally pinned to the floor. Crushing her body against his, she emitted a spontaneous moan that moved something inside Harry. One hand firmly on her hair, he let his other hand roam to her leg and pulled it closer towards him. She groaned again and moved a bit, straddling his middle and setting his nerves on fire.

Curiously enough, just as he had had that feeling, he suddenly began to be deliriously warm, but, unfortunately, it had nothing to do with Ginny and what she was doing to him. He opened his eyes groggily and after a moment of disbelief, he pulled Ginny away and grabbed his wand from his trousers.

'What -'

But then Ginny saw, clearly, what. Half of the Gryffindor room was on fire.

'Aguamenti! Aguamenti! Aguamenti!' Harry shouted at the top of his lungs, running through the dorm and pointing his wand at every corner, trying to put out the flames that were consuming it.

'McGonagall's going to kill me,' said Harry, taking in the harm done to the room. A tornado would have left it in a better state: hangings reduced to ashes, half-burnt pieces of wood spread on the floor, blackened windows, cracked stones...

'At least that was a hell of a passionate snog. I never thought it would be possible to set fire on something just by making out. I don't even

want to think what would have happened if we had done more than just kissing,' she finished, smirking triumphantly seeing how much she caused Harry to blush.

'Ginny, it's not funny' he berated her, trying to sound authoritative.

'Oh yes it is. You are going to have a new title, Harry!' she said between laughs, clutching her sides. 'Harry Potter-and-the-Order-of-the-snog-First-Class; and he's on fire, girls!' she added, doing a perfect imitation of those very much annoying advertisement voices he had so often heard on the TV at the Dursleys'.

Harry scowled at her and turned to see what he could do to improve the state of the room. After a bunch of spells and charms, the dorm had somewhat improved but he still couldn't pass it as if he had never been there. Sighing, he admitted he would have to get Hermione to help him with this too, miffed at the thought on how much he depended on her outstanding brains. He only hoped Ron would never get a wind of what had happened between his sister and himself there. He would try to come with a convincing excuse, anyway.

'Come on,' he said, pulling an amused Ginny out of the room.

What if the whole incident had to do with what he had overheard and then talked with McGonagall about at the Hospital Wing? If that was the case then things were going to be much more complicated than what he had thought before. That type of things angered him to no extent; just when the bloody effing war was over, he now had to worry about not killing Ginny off accidentally.

'Are you alright?' Ginny asked behind him.

Harry frowned and scratched his scar. 'I'm fine – it's just that something really weird happened before and, well, I'll tell you later, I

promise. But first, I need to find Ron and Hermione. Do you know where they are?’

‘Yep, they are actually waiting for you at the Great Hall. They thought you’d go straight there. I wasn’t sure you would, so I went back to your dorm. Merlin, glad I did so!’ she smirked at him.

Walking silently by Ginny’s side and heading to the Great Hall, Harry tried to ignore the many awed looks he was receiving and the many girls who were desperately trying to catch his eye. Oh, for the love of Agrippa! This was just starting to be absolutely ridiculous! He wasn’t anything special; he wasn’t a sexy hunk like Sirius had been, he didn’t have the charm or the wit to make females swoon at his feet, he didn’t have anything! He was just a tall, thin, seventeen year-old who happened to have defeated –

And then, it hit him. Voldemort was dead. It was over. There was no crazy madman after his blood anymore. No more luring nightmares. No scar-induced pain. It took all of his self-control to continue walking towards the Great Hall and not stop to jump in joy. He couldn’t manage to wipe off the gleeful smile on his lips, though.

A small white hand grabbing his own pulled him out of his reverie as he locked his eyes with Ginny’s questioningly. ‘I must warn you, there will be some Ministry employees there to ensure Voldemort is dead, and they’ll probably stick their overlarge noses up your ass,’ she told him.

Harry snorted. Trust Ginny to try to give him a warning and make it look like some kind of perversion. ‘The Ministry can go and blast itself for all I care,’ he snarled.

She smiled brightly at him. ‘Or, I could just Bat-Bogey Hex them.’

Harry’s lips turned upwards, fully aware of how much she loved that curse. One might say she had an unhealthy obsession with it, then

number of times she'd threatened her brothers with that particular hex. Admittedly, Harry was very much scared of Ginny when she was ticked off.

'What has happened to the Death Eaters that were captured?' Harry asked, remembering that he hadn't questioned McGonagall earlier that day.

Ginny rubbed her chin thoughtfully. 'They are all huddled together in the Great Hall next to Voldemort's body, chained and unarmed,' she told him, oblivious to the fact that she was making him nervous, 'honestly, I don't know what the Ministry's thinking; I mean, leaving those psychopaths next to their very much lunatic and very much dead leader, Merlin, it's just asking them to attack us at any moment!'

Harry nodded glumly as he reached the doors to the Great Hall, and before he knew it, he was spitting bushy brown hairs out of his mouth. Merlin, Hermione did really have a 'hugging people thing'!

'How are you feeling? Are you alright? Why did you pass out? Are you hurting? Are you tired? Do you want to do this later?' she asked frantically, searching his face looking for some weakness to send him straight to the infirmary again.

Disentangling himself from her strong grip, as Ginny shot him an amused smile and Ron rolled his eyes, Harry told her that he was fine, thank you very much indeed. Moving his eyes around the hall, he saw that there was quite a crowd gathered inside; all the teachers, the Weasleys, what was left of the Order, the DA, the corpse of Lord Voldemort, very much in the same position as when his own Avada Kedavra hit him, the bunch of living Death Eaters, Malfoys included, Ministry officials and, much to his chagrin, that slimy and disgusting toad, Dolores Jane Umbridge.

His face set with a grimace, he nodded to Kingsley and said loud enough for everyone to hear, 'right, let's get this over and done with,'

and he pulled out his wand and pointed it at Voldemort, 'Mobilicorpus!'

Gasps followed him as he moved the floating body to the entrance doors, apparently no-one had been able to do anything to it before Harry had come.

'Potter, what are you doing?' Umbridge asked him with her ever so annoying girlish voice.

Harry shot her a scathing look and very calmly answered, the body floating beside him, 'I'm going to blast Voldemort's body to smithereens just in case some tries to use it as an Inferius or something much worse.'

Not paying any attention to flinches at Voldemort's self-made name, or the looks of utmost hatred some people were giving him, he proceeded to walk outside with the corpse behind him, noticing that Ron and Hermione were also forcing the Death Eaters to the grounds to, as they whispered to him, make them see with their own eyes that their master was gone forever.

He settled the body just next to the lake, and before he did anything to get rid of it, something clicked in his mind. Something wasn't right, something was off, and he didn't like at all the self-satisfied smirk that was playing on Umbridge's lips. 'Where's Voldemort's wand?' he voiced.

The gathered crowd stared at him, some of them at a loss about what he was talking about because they had seen him only a few nights ago getting the wand the Dark Lord had in his possession, others who had their eyes opened in understanding, some were thinking that Potter was definitely off his rocker, just like Dumbledore had been and the rest of them truly afraid at what the Boy-Who-Conquered might do if he didn't get what he wanted. The only one who was actually trying to hide her smile was Umbridge.

Harry sighed. After Voldemort, Umbridge was second in his “I hate you” list. Not taking any notice in what he was doing, as anger flooded through his veins, he waved his wand and the wand burst out from Umbridge’s bag, zooming towards him as he swiftly caught it in the air.

‘How dare you, Potter?’ Umbridge sneered. ‘That’s my wand! I command you to give it back to me this instant or -’

‘Or nothing, Umbridge. This is not your wand but Voldemort’s wand -’

Umbridge’s nostrils flared, making her look like a very red and very constipated ugly toad. ‘That’s a lie, that’s my wand!’

Harry raised his fist and, although he would’ve very much wanted to shoot her a very rude gesture, he refrained himself and let everyone see the scars on the back of his hand, the words she made him draw on it with his own blood still etched on his otherwise smooth skin. ‘I must not tell lies, professor. And really, Umbridge, that’s twice you stolen something that wasn’t yours. Funny both objects are rightfully mine, isn’t it?’ he humoured her.

For a brief moment, Harry thought his former teacher was going to blow up just like his Aunt Marge had done five years ago. She was so red and her eyes were popping out from her sockets so much that she no longer looked comical at all. She was, in fact, quite frightening.

Before Umbridge could try to reach out and kill Harry with her bare stubby hands, Professor McGonagall stepped in front of her and shot her eyes at Harry. ‘Mr Potter, those are some very serious accusations. If you can’t provide any evidence -’

Harry smiled warmly at her, fully aware that she was dying to get some revenge on the ugly toad. ‘Actually, professor, I do have some

evidence. Firstly, there used to be a locket in my house with an S engraved upon it that Madam Umbridge here claimed to be hers as she was oh-so-delightfully a part of the Selwyn family. Unfortunately for her, that S does not stand for Selwyn but for Slytherin, and seeing that it had been in my household for such a long time, one could say that she was holding a property of mine without my consent. For any further doubt, you may ask Kreacher the house elf or Mundungus Fletcher,' he said grinning widely at the horrified look on Umbridge's face and Ginny's predatory smirk. 'Secondly, if this,' he started, raising the wand in his hand, 'is indeed Lord Voldemort's wand, a very funny event should happen when it battles against my own wand; if it isn't then I can only accuse Umbridge of one sole theft and not two.'

Handing his own wand to Ginny, he told her to shoot a Disarming Spell at him when he told her to do so, brandishing himself Voldemort's wand. Standing twenty feet away from her, he nodded at her and they both cried at the same time, 'Expelliarmus!'

Twin beams of red light connected and, to everyone's utter amazement, a phoenix song filled the room. Just as Harry had planned, his own wand in Ginny's hands was forcing Voldemort's wand into the Priori Incatatem almost effortlessly given that it had already twice bested the Dark Lord's wand. He was bloody well going to prove it was Voldemort's wand and he was well going to do it on that revolting toad's face surprising the hell out of her!

No-one save Harry knew what was going to happen next, and before everyone's eyes, screams filled the hall as the smoky figure of the former Muggle Studies professor emerged from the wand. Bouncing on the floor, Charity Burbage said aloud, 'You-Know-Who killed me with this wand and then fed my body to his pet snake Nagini!'

More screams and more blurry forms emerged from the connection, many of them unknown to Harry. Some time later, the echo of Madam Bones came out and Harry knew he was almost there... two

more figures... a scream... another figure... a silver hand... the echo of Cedric Diggory... Frank Bryce... Bertha Jorkins... and then, suddenly, the smoky figures of Lily and James Potter rose, flanking his son, much to everyone's shock.

Lily Potter turned to her son, smiling silently at him as James grinned widely, 'blimey, Harry! Dumbledore taught you well! You sure have some wicked style!'

Harry nodded at them sadly, knowing that he had already proved his point and that he couldn't hold the connection much longer, 'thank you Dad, Mum,' he whispered, his voice breaking.

'Let go, son' James urged him gently as Harry broke the connection.

An army of echoes by his side, Harry looked at the gathered living crowd before him defiantly, as if daring them to accuse him of murdering his own parents at the age of one. No-one said a word, no-one barely dared to breathe as the figures shone brightly and then vanished.

'If you are all wondering what was that about,' Harry broke the silence, glaring at Umbridge, 'I have just proven that I was right and that this is in fact Lord Voldemort's wand since his wand and my own are brothers and therefore can't battle properly against each other.'

'Priori Incantatem,' McGonagall said.

'Precisely,' Harry agreed. 'So, Umbridge, you have stolen two of my things. Why on earth you'd want to keep Voldemort's wand, I don't know; and, quite frankly, I prefer it stays like that,' he told her angrily, 'and before you say it isn't my wand, as Mr Ollivander once told me, it's the wand that chooses the wizard, and since I've killed Voldemort, the wand is rightfully mine.'

'Crikey, he's so sexy when he goes all commando,' Ginny whispered.

Covering his blush and ignoring the stares of the rest of the people around, Harry set his heart to carry out the task given to him, destroy what was left of Lord Voldemort, the darkest wizard of all times.

Walking down to the lake shore, where he had left the corpse, Harry gathered all of his strength and sighed heavily. He really didn't know what on Circe's name he had done to deserve every single thing that had ever happened to him. Why had he to be marked? Why had his parents have to die for him? Why did Sirius and

Dumbledore die for him, too? Why must he be in the headlights every time Tom Riddle's name came up? Why couldn't everyone just bloody leave him alone?

Oh well, there was no point in crying over split potion; he might just as well get a move on and hopefully, from then on, he would finally be able to put his past behind him and seek a future without any of that sort of torture. Letting the warm June air fill his lungs, he stared down at the lifeless form of what had once been an orphan boy like himself, Tom Marvolo Riddle.

It was uncanny how similar and yet how different they were. Both homeless, not having known for a good ten years what being liked and appreciated was, not having known they were magical until they had been accepted into Hogwarts... two forsaken boys fated to be enemies.

Even in his death, Voldemort was capable of sending shivers down Harry's spine, those red gleaming eyes so full of hatred, of anguish, of power. But they were empty, void, and Harry waved his hand unwittingly, closing them and lifting his body again to float a few feet above the lake's surface.

The empty shell of his long time nemesis stood before him unmoving but not peaceful, and Harry felt his insides burn knowing that the

carcass before him was the reason he didn't have his parents, the reason why he had lost Sirius and Dumbledore, the reason Cedric and so many others had died. So much hatred and suffering - and for what? For glory? For power? Everything was useless without your friends...

Some people gasped at his change, but Harry didn't even register as his eyes turned to the deepest midnight blue, the air around him cracking with magical power. Letting his magic unwind, he poured on the dead body all of the anguish it had caused him when it was still alive, when it had been his terrifying mortal enemy: Lord Voldemort, Heir of Slytherin.

Suddenly, blue flames engulfed the body of Tom Riddle, burning his flesh and his robes, ready to be turned into nothing but ashes, erasing what remained of his reign of terror. No-one dared to make a sound, everyone stood transfixed as step by step dust began falling to the lake's surface and then –

A shiver.

A bloodcurdling scream.

-oOoOoOoOo-

DICLAIMER: If I owned Harry Potter, would you honestly think I'd be writing this fic instead of swimming in my own private pool of money?

A/N: Hi! Well I hope you liked the first chapter. I don't want to anger any of those who loved the DH, but I really felt extremely disappointed in it, so I decided to write a new fic. Sometimes you will end up thinking that it is way too imaginative, but I hope you end up liking it. Be warned, there will be loads of action and adventure, and while I am a big Harry/Ginny fan, my main focus is not their developing relationship, although it will always be present. I will try to write this story in a way in which the characters grow into adulthood

and at the same time continue with my plot to make them sweat to win the fight. Some things may turn nasty, few may turn pretty, but I will try to do my best.

Well, I think it's pretty long for a first chapter, I hope you like it. So, next chapter, which is called "Chapter two: Where Nothing Ends and Everything Begins" will be up soon enough. It's already been written, I just want to check a few things before posting it. And, don't worry, a bit of some action starts. I mean, I just can't start with all the action/adventure on the first two chapters, it'd be so weird, and anyway, I have to plan it carefully so as to not give everything away on the first chapters. But still, I am not planning on writing chapters where nothing happens, that would just piss me off so much.

Many thanks to Scurvy Ragamuffin (FFnet) who has oh-not-so-subtly pushed my ass into writing this. She actually really likes my plot and has been on my case ever since I started talking to her about it via messenger. You rule, Scurvy!

Kudos to anyone who guesses who screamed. Please REVIEW! It only takes a few seconds to do so! Please pretty please with cherries on top!

Cheers

Vermouth

Member of the Siriusan Order

REVISED: 08/04/2008 (Thank you, Hasufel!)

Chapter Two

Where Nothing Ends and Everything Begins

Someone who hadn't been fighting to keep himself alive for such a long time would have been very much slower; but Harry, whose life had been in mortal peril since before he had been born and who had been fighting with everything he had to stop what looked like the end of the days the moment he had taken his place in the wizarding world, was very quick. Indeed, the paranoid mind of Harry Potter made him spin on his heels, faster than you can say "Voldemort", brandishing his wand, as if expecting to battle again for his life.

But this time, Harry's sixth sense had failed him. Nobody was attacking him; actually, to his best knowledge, nobody was being attacked.

It was the Death Eaters who were screaming.

Some of the people who had been there to witness the disposal of Tom Riddle's body thought that they were only yelling and shouting because they had seen what remained of their master being burned to ashes; but Harry, who had been several times at the end of a Cruciatus Curse and who knew perfectly well what pain meant, knew better than that.

They were agonising.

Running towards them, not thinking that they were Death Eaters, not minding that all of them would want him six feet below the ground, went to reach them, to see if there was something he could do to spare their pitiful lives, no matter what they were, what they had decided to become. For a split second, just as Harry bent down to see what was wrong with them, unaware of the looks he was getting from the rest of the people, he found himself shocked at how much his reaction was similar to the late Albus Dumbledore, trying to help

anyone no matter what they were. Did that mean he would sometime in the future be as manipulating and deceiving as his former mentor had been, lying to everyone for “The Greater Good”? That he would become so arrogant and sure of himself as to not spot he had been thwarted and betrayed? But then again, Severus Snape had never left Dumbledore’s side since he had become a spy. No matter what a slimy, greasy git he had been, he had been loyal to the Light Side till his death.

Harry and the few people who had joined him, Ginny and Kingsley included, watched, horrified, what was left of Voldemort’s supporters writhe in agony, at a loss as to explain what was happening, but knowing very well that they were suffering an excruciatingly painful and slow death.

Maybe it was because they had known each other for such a long time, and, had therefore a history together and a relationship; admittedly, they hated each other, but it was still a relationship, although not the kind anyone would wish for. It was funny that he was reminded of how similar they both were to the late Severus Snape and James Potter. But Harry knew that his dad would never want his

nemesis dead: no matter how much he despised him, he would try to save his life just as he had done previously at the end of his sixth year, when he had risked his own life to spare him from a werewolf’s clutches. Funny to think that if the roles had been reversed, if it had been James or Harry who had needed saving, they would probably both be dead, the former never having had a son of his own and the latter having died at the age of seventeen, not knowing at all what life was all about.

For whatever reason, Harry was horrified by the sight of a dying Draco Malfoy.

Flashes of their years at Hogwarts came to his mind, astounded at how much time had passed since he had first met the stuck-up pale

blond boy with a pointed nose that was presently in front of him. He remembered his first ride aboard the Hogwarts' Express when Malfoy had tried to pull him to his side... he remembered the infamous midnight duel... when he shouted "You'll be next, Mudbloods!" in his second year when the writing on the wall had appeared, "The Chamber of Secrets has been opened. Enemies of the Heir, beware"... he recalled with a feeble smile how he had felt when he had first snatched the Snitch right under Malfoy's nose... his laugh when Harry had collapsed on the train because of the Dementors... the whole Buckbeak issue and how angry Malfoy had been when the hippogriff fled... "Draco Malfoy, the amazing bouncing ferret" memory that would be forevermore stored as one of his funniest ones... the fight on the Quidditch pitch just as Gryffindor had won the match against Slytherin and Harry's subsequent ban from the sport... the Inquisitorial Squad... how pale he had looked all along their sixth year, plotting and scheming an attack on the school... but Harry knew that he would never forget that, although saying that he disliked him was the understatement of the year, Malfoy had lowered his wand at Dumbledore...

Looking into the bane of his school days, immersing himself in those cold and proud grey eyes, Harry realised something that made the difference in the world.

Draco Malfoy, however snobbish, rude, insufferable and downright infuriating, had never really cared about the feud against Muggleborns and Muggles. True, he had strutted all his life because he was a pure-blood, but basically, he had unconsciously enjoyed having Muggleborns around him, being able to sneer upon them, to laugh about their origin, to state that he was better than the vast majority of the wizarding population because he was a member of the Malfoy clan.

But could Harry really lay the blame on Malfoy? If he was honest to himself, no, he couldn't. He had been brought up like that, just as Harry had been raised to believe he himself was a smelly and rotting

cabbage at the Dursleys' home. That didn't stop Malfoy from being an idiot, but Harry couldn't just point his finger accusingly at him... "There will come a time when you must decide between what is right and what is easy"... yes, blaming Malfoy was an escape route, and Harry was so tired of escaping.

It was, again, Voldemort's fault. Voldemort, whose own experience at a Muggle orphanage had hardened him so much to grow up hating the non-magical community; Voldemort, whose cunning and cruelty had tore so many families and lives apart... And yet, even though Riddle had been the cause of so much grief for several decades, Harry realized that, still, it wasn't all Voldemort's fault.

Basically, it was the whole magical society. Wizards, too proud and independent of the Muggles, had always thought themselves better because they had magic running through their veins. Despite most of them didn't support Muggle-hunting and killing, they still thought them less than humans, less than a wizard – one had only to look at the ex-Minister for Magic, Cornelius Fudge, whose bigotry and pompous-self had made him favour a Death Eater, had made him step aside and let Voldemort regain full power, and had not listened to and furthermore discredited the boy and old man who were relentlessly trying with all their might not to let the world succumb again to the power of Lord Voldemort.

In Harry's opinion, all of the wizarding ideas had to be erased, and they all had to build the new morale from within their hearts, slowly, step by step, and, maybe, if they did, they would never surrender to the fear provoked by someone like Voldemort. Maybe it was only a fool's hope, but Harry still thought they needed to try.

For one fleeting instant, Harry admired the wisdom of Albus Dumbledore, of him knowing all along that love was the only thing that could truly save someone. It was his mother's love that had saved Harry against the otherwise unstoppable Killing Curse... Love that had pushed him to rescue Sirius in his fifth year, no matter he

had been deceived... Love, that had made him hate the former Potions Master for taking the life of his almost worshipped mentor... Love, what had convinced Ron and Hermione into immersing themselves in the craziest and most dangerous adventure they had ever shared... Love, what had been Lord Voldemort's downfall. Not power, not skill, not some unknown magic, just that simple feeling many people take for granted; that thing that happened between a father and a son, between sister and brother, between wife and husband...

Dumbledore had been the wisest man to walk this earth. He had known that it was only that feeling that could ever make a Death Eater change sides, the only thing that could redeem the darkest and cruellest of the souls.

But Draco Malfoy had not been like Severus Snape. Malfoy had never known what it was to love someone so deeply, so entirely; to feel the world crumble at his feet because his master had killed her...

'I am sorry' he whispered, reaching out and closing the eyes that would never again open of Draco Malfoy.

Not talking to anyone, Harry rose to his feet and walked away, oblivious to the people who were calling him, oblivious to the looks of disbelief etched on the faces of some of the Ministry officials, oblivious to the storm that was being brewed up high in the skies, oblivious to anything apart from the burning pain deep within his heart...

-oOoOoOoOo-

Dawn found Harry in his Hogwarts' four-poster, his eyes fixed on the strange and wild storm that had been going on since the previous day, his mind far, far away...

Maybe it was stupid of him, but some part of him deeply regretted he

hadn't been there to help Malfoy. True, Draco would have probably scorned and sneered at him, saying that he would never sink so low so as to call for his help, but still – there was so much more he could've done to make matters better.

Sighing heavily, Harry pulled himself out of his bed and went to the showers, fully aware that between his growing headache and Ron's loud snores he wouldn't be able to fall asleep again. Dolefully looking for his wand, he found that some of the Hogwarts' house-elves had left him some clothes and a towel. Smiling sadly, that simple gesture reminded him so painfully of Dobby, the craziest and most loyal being he had ever encountered. He then remembered Kreacher and how he had appeared at the Battle, fighting for Regulus, fighting for him. He would most definitely have to do something about house-elves' rights.

As silently as he could, Harry crept to the bathroom and locked the door behind him from the inside. Leaving the towel and the clean robes and underwear on the sink, he undressed himself, spraying his garments all over the cold floor.

Ten minutes later, under the influence of copious amounts of hot water, Harry felt his muscles beginning to unstiffen. Sinking his head below the water in his bath, he rubbed his very sore calves before he had to emerge to breathe again.

Looking absent-mindedly at the foam and bubbles that covered most of his body, Harry began to think about the war and the high price they had all paid, especially him.

That day he would have to continue the burials, he would have to convince people about Professor Snape's true loyalties and try to bury him next to Dumbledore. He would have to, unfortunately, deal with all the Ministry bureaucracy; hopefully not having to resort to setting a Blast-Ended Screwt on any idiot that might tick him the wrong way. He would have to say goodbye to Colin Creevey, Fred,

Tonks and so many others he had known for such a long time. But worse, even worse than Fred, was saying goodbye to a person he had never truly appreciated that much before, someone he had so inconsiderately labelled as a coward when, quite rightfully, he had only been scared to death to be left behind and be the last of the survivors, alone again...

He would have to see the coffin of his best ever Defence Against the Dark Arts professor lower to the ground, down...down...down... until it reached the place where it will stay for all eternity. He would have to take his godson in his arms, little Ted Remus Lupin, and try not to cry knowing that he held another orphan boy; but although the baby no longer had any of his parents, Harry promised himself that he'd rather die than let a child grow up unloved, uncared for.

Pushing himself out of the bath and covering his soaked body with a towel, he looked at his own tired reflection in the mirror. His bright green eyes, the only trait he had inherited from his mother, were no longer happy but dull and sad. His tousled hair, now laying flat obediently on his head till it was dry again; his thin, young face, so tired.

'I am definitely not looking forward to the rest of the day,' he muttered morosely.

-oOoOoOoOo-

If Harry had thought saying goodbye to Remus was difficult; if he had thought comforting a broken-hearted mother had been tough; if he had thought that holding in his arms a boy like himself that would never know what wonderful people his parents had been save from what he heard from others; it was nothing – nothing – compared to what burying Fred Weasley was.

Although both twins had always told him that to them, Harry was a Weasley through and through without the infamous red hair; Harry

had never truly believed himself a part of the Weasley clan. There had always been something that had set him apart: he had never known what a hug was, he had always looked after himself because no-one would ever help him, he had been a marked man, the main target of Lord Voldemort. Maybe the true reason why he had always kept the distances was because he never expected to survive the war, and so, it wouldn't hurt as much if he wasn't the adoptive Weasley.

But now, lowering Fred's coffin, Harry felt as if he was losing a brother, his own kin. He felt his heart break as Mrs. Weasley's knees faltered and she fell to the ground, crying as he had never seen anyone else cry before.

He felt his voice and his throat constricting at the sight of Mr Weasley, lowering to help his wife up, surrounding her with his arms, trying to give her some silent comfort while tears rolled down his pale cheeks.

Bill and Charlie shouldn't have been there in the first place in their Healers' opinion, they should have stayed at St. Mungo's until they saw fit to release them because their bodies were still heavily battered. But Harry doubted that even if they skies were scorched and fell down, it would prevent them from attending their brother's funeral.

Percy was standing away from the rest of his family, unsure if he should get any closer or not. But still, he was a Weasley after all, and seeing his mother succumb to grief made him forget any of his previous awkwardness and ran engulf her in a hug with his father.

Usually, Harry would have felt his cheeks burn in embarrassment if someone hugged him. But at that moment, there was no uneasiness in Ginny's hug. He didn't mind if she was clinging to him like a lifeline; he didn't care if his sweater was getting wet. It felt right to comfort her since it was about the only thing he could do for her.

He could see that Hermione was doing the same with Ron. She was trying with all her might not to cry in front of him, she had to be strong for him. For a fleeting instant, their eyes connected and Hermione told him silently that she wanted to talk to him afterwards, alone. He nodded briefly, careful not to crush his chin with Ginny's head and went back to concentrate on the limp form in his arms.

There were many people around from the twins' days at Hogwarts: Lee Jordan, Angelina Johnson, Alicia Spinnet, Katie Bell, Oliver Wood, Hagrid, Professors Flitwick and McGonagall... Some of them were crying openly, some of them were holding their tears back, some of them had a sober look on their faces.

Words couldn't describe the look of despair on George's face. Probably no-one close to him would ever truly understand him, no-one else knew what to have a twin and then lose it was. There was no smile, no twinkle in his eyes; nothing but his red hair, freckles and bizarre robes told Harry he was one of the twins, it was as if George had died too and the only thing that remained was an empty shell.

It wasn't right. Everything was wrong. The twins had been about being loud, about being jokers and pranksters, and today there wasn't anything in there that reminded him about their spirits. He didn't want to sound disrespectful, but maybe he ought to try and crack a joke, or do something funny or –

George had set off a firework.

Harry smiled a bit. Maybe they would be alright.

-oOoOoOoOo-

'What's up?' Harry asked later, sinking on the couch in front of the fireplace at the Burrow.

‘I wanted to talk to you in private,’ Hermione answered quietly, transfiguring a chess piece into a glass and conjuring some water in it.

‘I figured as much at the funeral,’ Harry said. Standing up, he turned to her and asked, ‘do you mind if we go for a walk?’

Shaking her head, she took a sip of her water and left it on a table, following Harry into the garden.

It was a beautiful night. There were still some clouds, but one could see the stars above them. There were many of them, many shiny spots all over the sky, but there was one that shone the brightest, one that made him smile slightly. Harry didn’t know why, but that sight made his heart soar a bit, he felt something like hope and peace grow in his chest. Of course, if he had studied Astronomy a bit more thoroughly, he would’ve spotted that the brightest star in the sky was Sirius.

‘How did you manage not to wake Ginny up?’ Harry asked absent-mindedly as he gazed at a garden-gnome that was trying to sneak into a near hole.

‘I didn’t. Ginny went to sleep with George,’ Hermione replied cautiously.

‘It wasn’t very difficult to get out of the room without Ron noticing, he was snoring.’

She snorted softly. The day Ron stopped snoring was the day Gilderoy Lockhart would become humble, modest and honest. ‘It’s good that he can sleep. I could hear from Ginny’s room Mrs Weasley crying.’

Wanting to change the subject, Harry asked, ‘is there some reason you wanted to meet me at two am?’

She nodded vigorously. 'Two reasons, actually. Wait – do you mind if we go near the entrance where there is some light and sit down? I really want to walk, but I am also exhausted,' she complained.

He agreed and walked with her down to the threshold and sat on one of the steps. Light was dimly illuminating Hermione's face, making her look as if she hadn't had a wink in a whole year. 'I wanted to talk to you this morning, but what with you going to the Ministry to talk to Kingsley, persuade them that Professor Snape was on our side, Remus's funeral and everything else I just couldn't find the time. And yesterday you had stormed out -'

'Is this about the Death Eaters?' Harry demanded, uneasiness creeping deep within his chest.

'Partly. Why didn't you tell us before anything else apart that Voldemort's and your wand shared twin cores?' she inquired, and from the tone of her voice, Harry knew she was a bit hurt.

Running a hand through his hair with one hand and picking the two wands from his pocket with the other, Harry saw in his mind his terrified fourteen year-old self in that forsaken graveyard, ready to die like his father, straight and proud. Not looking at Hermione but examining the two wands closely, he whispered, 'you must understand that talking about the Priori Incantatem brings back terrible memories... When I should have been throwing a party after the Triwizard Tournament, getting dizzy at how girls' minds work, I was alone at the graveyard, Cedric had just been killed in front of my eyes, Pettigrew had taken my blood to resurrect my foe... I had to put up with humiliation, my own despair... the pain of seeing Cedric, my parents... I don't think I've ever been so scared in my life, not even at the battle, I just -'

Hermione put a hand on top of his and squeezed it gently. 'I'm sorry, I should have understood. I am sorry,' she told him, her eyes slightly

bloodshot.

Few minutes passed in an uncomfortable silence, both of them lost in their own thoughts. Looking intently at Voldemort's wand, he thought it was somewhat ironic that he wanted to keep the weapon that had taken the lives of his parents instead of destroying. He didn't know the reason of his behaviour towards it, he only knew that there would come a time where he would need it. When that was Harry could only fathom.

'What would you say about going tomorrow to Diagon Alley, shopping spree?' Hermione asked suddenly.

Harry's ears perked up and he remembered something, 'shouldn't you be going to Australia?'

Her cheeks reddened a bit and she lowered her gaze to her feet, shuffling them awkwardly. 'I wanted to calm down before I go to pick them up. With so much tension and everything I might as well explode. Also, I wanted to go there via aeroplanes, and the soonest I can afford is a ticket in October,' she muttered. 'So, what do you say about the shopping spree?'

He tilted his head and ran a hand through his hair again, using the other to rub his eyes pensively. 'Do you think it's a good idea? I mean; firstly, there are the goblins, and I reckon they won't be too happy with me; secondly there will be reporters all around and thirdly and most important – the twins' shop.'

Hermione clapped her hand over her mouth. 'Of course – I didn't think about that...'

Harry waved his hand dismissively at her. 'It's still a good idea. We should talk to Mr and Mrs Weasley about it tomorrow – or in a few hours' time more likely, given the hour,' he said, realising that it was nearly three in the morning. Yawning widely and trying to shake off

some of the dizziness that was taking over him, he asked her 'anything else you wanted to talk to me about?'

'I – I have a theory about what happened to the Death Eaters -' she started tentatively. Seeing as Harry's body language changed from groggy to eyes wide open in alert, she added hastily, 'but it's only a theory, I'm not sure if I am right. I need to check up on some books -'

'What is it?' Harry asked impatiently.

Hermione hesitated for one second. 'Right. Remember about the DA coins and the spell I had put on them for them to work, the Protean Charm? Remember that I told you that I had been inspired to do that by the Dark Mark? Well, the thing is, that the Dark Mark is actually a modification of the Protean Charm since it isn't linked to an object, rather to an entity -'

But Harry wouldn't hear that night the rest of Hermione's likely brilliant theory because at that moment Mrs Weasley stepped into their living room and frogmarched them back into their respective common rooms.

Thinking about what on earth his friend's mind had worked out to explain those deaths, Harry fell asleep.

-oOoOoOoOo-

Harry wasn't surprised at all the following morning when he woke up feeling extremely tired. He had gone to sleep late into the night after all. Yawning widely, Harry walked downstairs and found almost all of the Weasley family plus Hermione - who had big, black bags under her eyes – gloomily picking at their food on their plates.

Slumping down on a chair between Ron and Ginny, Harry placed in front of him the heavy-laden breakfast Mrs Weasley had cooked for them all. Lifting his fork to his mouth, he began eating a bit of his

scrambled eggs, feeling uncomfortable at the awkward silence in the Weasley household.

‘I think it’s a good idea for you children to go outside and enjoy some fresh air,’ Mrs Weasley said randomly, not looking anywhere else but at the pans she was so thoroughly scrubbing.

Harry and Hermione, of course, agreed; but they were surprised because Ginny should be taking her final exams at Hogwarts right now, so she shouldn’t be able to come with them. Apparently, as Mr Weasley told them after having folded the Daily Prophet, all examinations had been cancelled until further notice, so, maybe, she’d end up sitting for them in the middle of July.

Almost reluctant and with a definite note of apprehension in her voice, Hermione told them about her idea of going to Diagon Alley that day. The reactions from the family were the ones Harry had expected: Mrs Weasley burst out crying, Bill and Charlie grimaced, Percy said nothing but looked as if he’d been covered with Stinkskap, George refused point-blank to get anywhere close to the alley, Mr Weasley nodded with a hard sober frown on his face, Ginny rocked backwards and forwards biting her lower lip, hesitatingly; and Ron simply continued eating, although his eyes darkened slightly.

An hour later, Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny were walking through the almost deserted, cobbled street of Diagon Alley. Harry had thought the place would be bursting with life but, as anyone could see, he couldn’t have been more wrong. Shrugging, he thought that it could be due that people were

still celebrating, not daring to believe that Lord Voldemort and everything that came with him was only to be now put in History books.

Oddly enough, at Gringotts, Harry wasn’t treated with any disrespect as he thought he would after his lack of honesty with Griphook.

Apparently, Griphook was the only one who resented him, the others were quite nice, for a want of a better word, to him. Merlin, he had been astounded when Ragnok, whom he remembered to be the biggest fish around in the bank, invited him and his friends for tea at his office.

‘It should have been done nearly a year ago, Mr Potter, but with the war and your – shall I say – adventurous disappearance, I decided to wait until you came here. The risk was too big to even consider sending an owl to you, in case it would have been intercepted – which, as it would have been addressed to you, I’m sure it would. I also suspected you didn’t want to be found until the right time.’

Harry, bemused, could only nod at the goblin. What, for the love of Agrippa, was he talking about? Could this have to do with the strange things (even at the wizarding world, where “strange” was normal) that seemed to happen around him lately? Like his increased magical levels and the Death Eaters’ eerie deaths?

‘Rest assured, Gringotts won’t be pressing any charges against you for breaking into the Lestranges’ vault – my family died in the last war, Mr Potter,’ he added as an explanation, seeing the confused look on his face. ‘But now, Mr Potter, to business - to business.’

Nearly two hours later, Harry left Ragnok’s office with a dazed look on his eyes. Apparently - Harry had never known of it - but the small fortune he had always used to buy his school supplies and some little treats was only the trust vault his parents had set up for him should they die too early, making him the only heir to the Potter line. The Potter vault, however, was a different story. It could only be accessed by the Head of House or the Potter heir when he reached adulthood, but the Head of House would always be informed of what the Potter Heir did in it. Also, Harry was informed that the security in his vault was one of the most extensive ones all over the world. For him to get in, he’d either have to try the Head of House or the Potter Heir Ring, because if he didn’t, no-one, not even him, could enter the vault.

When Hermione asked, Ragnok answered that the ring could only be wore by a true Potter, no matter if someone had taken blood out of him, either willing or unwillingly. The safety around the vault prevented anyone who hadn't been keyed into it from accessing it, having taken precautions against the Imperious Curse and other sorts of enchantments. Curiously enough, no-one could force the Head of House to key someone in, for it was solely based on an act of love and trust. Also, anyone who sought to wear one of the rings but wasn't a Potter, well, to put it mildly, let's say that he would have wished he had never been born.

Ragnok told them on the cart-ride that if the Head of House died or if the Potter Heir was deceased or had a child of his own, either ring would instantly be summoned to Gringotts and set on the vault's wall for the next Head or Heir to come and pass the test themselves. When Harry whistled in admiration at the brilliant piece of magic performed around his vault, Ragnok turned to look at him sharply.

'You should most certainly check up on your family tree, Mr Potter – you'll find some very famous witches and wizards there,' he told him most mysteriously.

Ragnok told him that since he was of age and the only Potter alive, he shouldn't wear the Potter Heir Ring but the Head of House one. Normally, the Potter Heir Ring should be worn till he had his own children, and couldn't be taken off his finger, not even by force, but, as he had explained before, he was the only Potter alive. The Head of House Ring had to be worn for the rest of his days unless something extremely unusual took place. However, he told him that it was necessary to pass both tests. So Harry, not without apprehension, put on both rings. The first one, the Potter Heir Ring, he felt a tingling sensation spreading from his left hand to the rest of his body. It wasn't unpleasant, it was only weird.

'That ring was usually put on children, so it's magicked not to be too horrible for them. In any case, the vault would still be controlled by

the Head.'

It seemed that Harry had passed the test because for a fleeting second, a blue glow engulfed him and on the wall a message appeared:

The Potter Vault recognises Harry James as the rightful Potter Heir

Welcome, blood of our blood

Harry then placed the ring on its previous spot and picked the other one, the Head of House Ring. Even though Harry was no great shakes at appreciating jewellery, he knew at once that the piece he was holding in his hand was both exquisite and invaluable. Made of white gold, a blend of rubies and sapphires, forming in a small loopy writing, House of Potter.

Harry would have had expected a reaction that nasty typical of a Malfoy or a Lestrangle, but definitely not from a Potter. The tingling, ticklish even, sensation he had felt with the other ring had nothing to do with the excruciatingly painful test he was being put through. It wasn't anything alike the Cruciatus Curse, it rather felt as if something was scanning through all of his cells, picking them and examining them with pins and bistouries and those other very deadly items Muggle surgeons used at a hospital. What seemed like hours later, but truthfully was only one minute or so, Harry was nearly blinded by a pure gold light and another writing on the wall appeared:

The Potter Vault recognises Harry James as the rightful Head of the House of Potter

May the power you now hold never stray you from the path of honesty and compassion

The first time Harry had come to Gringotts, almost seven years ago, he had been astonished at the amount of gold in front of him inside

his other vault. But his amazement at the sight of the Potter Family Vault was much stronger than with the other one: he had a bloody mountain of gold before his eyes, a mountain! Stepping into the vault, he saw that money wasn't the only thing he had there: there were portraits, furniture, a library, weapons, suits of armour, swords, daggers... To Harry's shock, the vault didn't seem to end, it was most definitely bigger than the Great Hall at Hogwarts.

Dumbfounded, Harry turned around to talk to his friends only to find them outside the vault, waiting for him. Ron, Ginny and Hermione had all glazed looks on their faces, not unlike Harry's, not having ever seen so much money together in their lives. Actually, Harry would have bet half of his money that they hadn't even thought it was possible for anyone to have so much gold. Ragnok, however, had a glossy look to him, one could see clearly how much he enjoyed gold, as any goblin did.

'How come you are outside? Why don't you come in?' Harry asked them stupidly.

'No-one that hasn't been keyed in can enter the vault, Mr Potter,' Ragnok replied, not tearing his eyes away from all of his riches. His voice slightly shaky, the goblin added, 'the last time this vault was opened, I couldn't see this – I was only the vice-president...'

Taking Ron's hand in his own and placing them together on the wall, as Ragnok had instructed, Harry said aloud enough for everyone around him to hear, 'I, Harry James Potter, hereby acknowledge Ronald Bilius Weasley a Friend of the House of Potter.'

Again, the loopy handwriting appeared on the wall as it had before, leaving another message.

The Potter Vault recognises Ronald Bilius Weasley as a Friend of the House of Potter

May your loyalty to the Potter line be repaid with your own happiness

A bronze light engulfed Ron and he was suddenly wearing another ring, the Friend of Potter Ring. As Ragnok told them, that particular ring would enable him to seek the help of any Potter for as long as he lived, no matter if Harry wasn't around anymore.

When Hermione's turn came, Harry said exactly the same words he had said previously and yet another bronze beam of light surrounded her as her branded her own ring. This time though, the message was different:

The Potter Vault recognises Hermione Jean Granger as a Friend of the House of Potter

May your wisdom be forevermore remembered among the Potter line

However, something odd happened when Ginny was declared a Friend of the House of Potter. Although Harry voiced the same sentence as he had before, the light that engulfed Ginny wasn't bronze but silver. At a loss at what to say, Harry just stared dumbly at the new message:

The Potter Vault recognises Ginevra Molly Weasley as a true Member of the House of Potter

May your love to the Potter line grant you your wish to become one of our own

Both blushing furiously, neither Harry nor Ginny dared to look at each other. Ignoring the knowing looks on Ron and Hermione's faces, he encouraged the three of them to walk inside the vault.

Ragnok was talking to him again, although his gaze still hadn't been broken away from the contents of his vault. Harry couldn't truly concentrate on what the goblin was telling him, something about

“Minister Shacklebolt... He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named... increase of one million Galleons... transference done on July the thirty-first the latest...” Honestly, how could he set his mind on any financial issue after what had been just written on that wall?

Twenty minutes passed in silence between Ragnok (glossy-eyed, stare fixed on the inside of the vault), when a question popped up in Harry’s brain. ‘What happens if a Head of House has more than one child?’

‘There is another vault for those Potters that are not to become the Head of House. As the name can only be carried down by a male, even if he isn’t the first-born, the rest are to become Potter Heirs and are left until they die or marry with the riches of the other vault, which is to be filled with the amount of money the Head of House of the time sees fit. Strangely enough, there is always a single Potter line, because the name dies either at marriage if it’s a woman; or couple of generations later, when another male Potter Heir only has female descendants. No-one knows why, but only the Head of House can produce male descendants.’

Sometime later, his three friends stepped out of the vault, awe etched on their faces. Hermione was talking excitedly about the books inside; Ron was muttering at the silly amounts of money; Ginny was simply too dumbstruck to say anything at all.

Before they left Gringotts, Harry filled his pocket with gold and, with one last look at Ragnok, he made up his mind.

Surprising the goblin, Harry picked him up. Ragnok started protesting quite loudly until Harry took his sharp hand in his own and placed it again on the wall. Any previous anger towards Harry was quickly changed to grateful and eagerness. Speaking loud and clear, Harry said ‘I, Harry James Potter, Head of the House of Potter, hereby acknowledge Ragnok as the Manager of the riches of the House of Potter.’

This time, a green light engulfed the goblin's small body as a new ring materialised out of thin air in his finger.

The Potter Vault recognises Ragnok as the Keeper of the riches of the House of Potter

May your financial advice be rewarded with countless hours of leisure inside the vault

Tears in his eyes, Ragnok thanked him profusely and told him he wouldn't delay him by going inside at the present moment. He promised him that he would guard ferociously his magnificent vault. He also mentioned that he should come around sometime to see the full list of the properties, but, that there was one in particular that he should sort out as soon as possible, since he was the new Head of House and everything. When Harry asked which property was, Ragnok grabbed a parchment from a piece of furniture inside the vault and said 'this should mean something to you as soon as I finish reading this,' he explained, unrolling the bit of paper, 'Potter Manor now belongs to the new Head of House, Harry James Potter.'

Without any previous warning, Harry's mind was filled with the image of a white and magnificent building, a dwelling that could be found at Domus Leonis... but how could he know where it was? Something then clicked in his brain and he knew it had to be correct. 'A modified Fidelius Charm,' he whispered.

Thanking Ragnok, the four of them left Gringotts, each lost in their own thoughts.

His family home. He would finally see some of his family home, a place where his ancestors had lived... his family...

-oOoOoOoOo-

Early evening found Harry and Ginny entering the Magical Menagerie in Diagon Alley to buy some food for all of the pets at the Burrow. Ron and Hermione had decided to wait outside for them as there was no point in all of them being inside.

After the mind-boggling visit to the wizard bank, they had leisurely spent the day walking around the shops, all save for Hermione had been tremendously excited at the prospect of the new broom that would be coming out in mid-July, the Thunderflame ('from zero to two hundred and fifty miles per hour in ten seconds, Hermione!' Ron had cried desperately, trying to make her understand). Lunch had been a pleasant affair at the Leaky Cauldron. They didn't need to put too much effort to keep the conversation light-hearted instead of depressing, which was most certainly a bonus.

In higher spirits, Harry approached Ginny and saw she was nearly done as she was pocketing the change back in her purse. Turning around, he proceeded to walk out of the shop going through a different way than when he had entered. He had just only one aisle of animals to walk through when he suddenly froze in his steps.

No... It was impossible... It couldn't be...

'What's wrong?' Ginny asked.

Not even acknowledging her question, he grabbed her hand quite forcefully and pulled her out of the shop as fast as his feet could carry him. Outside, he saw Ron and Hermione and told them quietly, 'we need to get out of here now. Grab my arm, hand or whatever.'

Harry Side-Along Apparated them to a deserted clearing in the woods in an instant. Ignoring both Ginny's and Ron's inquisitive looks and Hermione's calculating gaze, Harry said in a hushed voice, 'Potter Manor may be found at Domus Leonis.'

In front of them, the old majestic dwelling appeared in front of them,

the entrance door opened, welcoming them inside.

-oOoOoOoOo-

Any other day, Harry would have been delighted to explore the magnificent castle that had been his ancestors' home for many centuries. But today... today Harry's overwhelmed mind was too set on the problem at hand to notice anything apart from a pair of bouncing, overjoyed, elderly, twin house-elves by the name of Tweedle-Dee and Tweedle-Dum; ecstatic at seeing Master Harry sir safe and so grown up, the last time they had seen Master Harry sir was when he was being a baby.

But Harry dismissed them, told them that he was sorry, that he would greet them properly the next time he went there, that at the moment there was a huge problem that needed to be solved. The elves told Master Harry sir not to worry and excused themselves.

Pacing around frantically, he told the others to sit down. After a few minutes of an uncomfortable silence, not having found any easy way to say what he had to say, Harry decided to be blunt about it. 'I'm still a Parselmouth.'

'So?' asked Ron, nonplussed. 'You were a Parselmouth before. How's that new?'

But Harry knew that Hermione had understood perfectly what he meant, why he had been so worried at the Magical Menagerie – it was because he had heard the snakes there talking. He shouldn't have been able to understand Parseltongue anymore... 'But how's that possible?' she asked in a whisper.

'Huh?' Ron asked intelligently.

Running a hand through his hair, Harry continued pacing nervously up and down the room. 'I don't know. The Horcrux in me was

destroyed... the Avada Kedavra made sure of that... Voldemort's death proved it – I just don't know why these things are happening!' he cried frustrated, a slight edge of anger in his voice.

'What things?' Ron demanded.

Ginny waved her hand at him impatiently. 'Oh, Ron – honestly, you can be so dense sometimes -'

'Hey -'

'Haven't you noticed all the weird things going on around?' she inquired, as she rubbed her temples. 'First, there's Harry collapsing for some unknown reason; then, there's Harry setting the dorm on fire unwillingly -'

'You set the dorm on fire?' Hermione asked scandalised.

'Unwillingly, Hermione, is the key word,' Ginny continued, ignoring Harry's ferocious blush. 'Lost control of his emotions, I suppose. Anyway, the dormitory was fixed later by Kreacher,' she added. Then, frowning, she looked at Harry, 'where was I?'

'Third point,' Harry supplied.

'Oh yes – thirdly, I heard from Flitwick when he was talking to Madam Pomfrey that his nightmares had been getting progressively worse until they stopped abruptly when he had dreamed very accurately about his own murder. Fourthly, the Death Eaters snuff it in the most inexplicable way possible – and now Harry's still a Parselmouth when he shouldn't be anymore?' she finished, standing up and pacing up and down the room as Harry had been doing not two minutes before.

Holding his head with one hand, an elbow propped on top of the chimney sill, Harry went on to say what they didn't know yet.

‘Remember the Elder Wand and how I had planned on returning it to Dumbledore’s grave?’ they all nodded and Harry continued. ‘I didn’t. It’s not that I want to keep it,’ he added hastily, ‘it’s just something at the back of my mind telling me that it will be needed. Same goes for Voldemort’s old wand – I can’t explain it, but I know that they’ll be necessary in the future... although I can’t suppress the feeling that there’s something missing, like a piece of a puzzle...’ he said, more to himself than to the rest of them.

But what could that be? Whenever he held the Elder Wand, although it was rightfully his, there was something that pulled him back; call it gut-intuition, but something about the wand made him feel as if he had stolen it from someone else. Stupid, really, but he couldn’t shake that feeling away... And Voldemort’s wand? Well, when Harry held both his faithful old wand and his nemesis’s old one, something told him to keep it, but that there was a missing piece...

‘But that’s not all,’ he continued, breaking out of his reverie, resuming his nervous walking around, ‘I overheard Madam Pomfrey talking to McGonagall the day I woke up after I had so mysteriously collapsed three days before that my magic levels had been multiplying themselves -’

‘Don’t you mean -?’

‘No, Hermione,’ Harry interrupted her, shaking his head, ‘I didn’t come to my full powers then. I didn’t even come to my full powers at my seventeenth birthday – I hadn’t even known such a thing existed... No, my powers were multiplying themselves, as if a block had been lifted, as if they had been unleashed... I suppose that’s why I set the dorm on fire.’

‘But – how?’ Ginny asked, flummoxed.

Harry shrugged his shoulders. ‘No-one knows. They only know the facts, not the reasons behind them.’

Hermione massaged her forehead, as if trying to get rid of an imaginary headache. 'I don't know about the rest, but I have a theory as to why the Death Eaters died like that.'

She started talking about the Protean Charm and how the Dark Mark had inspired her into using the charm on those fake coins. She told them that it was a piece of magic that was to be used on an object, not a living being - or at least that's what books had told her. She told them about her suspicions that Voldemort had modified the charm for him to use it on living being, using himself as the centre from which the message would be spread. Of course, the targets of the charm being living humans, it had to be slightly changed and its properties would therefore be altered; meaning, in order not to kill his Death Eaters, the message had been simplified to a burning sensation on their left forearms that could only mean that Voldemort wanted them in his presence. The Dark Mark couldn't deliver a message, it was just a shot of pain that had been translated by Voldemort.

Hermione theorised that for the Dark Mark to work, Voldemort should've linked it to his own soul; but, then again, after having have made so many Horcruxes, his soul was so badly maimed that he must have used both his body and what was left of his soul inside of his body to perform the charm.

She didn't know how Voldemort's mind had worked - she definitely didn't have the in-depth knowledge Harry had about that subject - but, she suspected that Voldemort being so cruel, would have enjoyed tremendously causing his followers pain and, in the unlikely case he was killed, that none of his so-called friends would ever take his place as a Dark Lord; so that if he failed, there would be no-one else able to use his secrets and try to outshine him. Hermione was convinced that Voldemort thought that if he died, he wanted to be remembered as the greatest Dark Lord in History.

The question was, "but how to do that?" Simple, by killing the rest of

his followers, the only ones who had been taught a bit of his own discoveries.

But how to dispose of his followers if he was dead? With the power of the Dark Mark. It was only a hypothesis, but she thought that he had used both his body, to channel the power and reinforce the broken piece of his soul inside it, which would serve as the focus of the charm. That way, if his body was destroyed again, but his soul still lived thanks to the Horcruxes, the Death Eaters would still live. She didn't think Voldemort had given too much thought about being defeated, that he had only covered the basics: getting rid of everyone should he ever be bested.

She told them she thought that the Death Eaters hadn't died the moment Voldemort did because the body was still intact and had some of the magic of the Dark Mark in it, no matter if the soul of their master had been destroyed. So, hypothetically speaking, what had killed the Death Eaters was having burned Voldemort's body to ashes.

'You know what all this means, right?' she asked.

Harry was too horrified to answer her. It had been his fault... he was a murderer...

'We need to talk to Dumbledore's portrait.'

-oOoOoOoOo-

Three days had passed since that eventful meeting at Potter Manor and Harry wasn't doing much better.

If he managed to master his emotions, Harry could see that it wasn't his fault, or at least not as much as he had thought before. It had been Voldemort's, for being just as ruthless to his followers as he had been with his enemies. It had been the Death Eaters' fault, for joining

the ranks of that lunatic. The Ministry's, for wanting him to get rid of the body... But there was a part of him that couldn't stop blaming himself, especially when Draco Malfoy's terrified face came into view.

Sighing heavily, grateful for the gale of wind that had just hit him on his face, suddenly awakening him, he sped up his pace to catch up with the other three that were going to Hogwarts with him, so they could all talk to the former Headmaster's portrait up in the castle at Professor McGonagall's office.

Walking through the grounds, Harry could see Hagrid's small cabin near the lake. He wished he could go and talk to him like he had always done ever since he had been introduced and accepted into the

magical community, but he didn't have any time at the moment. They needed answers, and they needed them now. If Dumbledore couldn't work it out, Harry was positive that no-one else could.

Just next to the White Tomb that held the body of Albus Dumbledore, Harry was glad to find that Kingsley had been able to convince the Wizengamot - no matter if he had had to resort to using the Boy-Who-Conquered's word - that Snape had been on their side and had given permission to build his tomb next to the Headmaster's, just as Harry thought he would have liked it to be. True, it was not as impressive as majestic as Dumbledore's, but Harry thought that the black-stoned one suited Snape just fine.

Curiously enough, they passed through the doors of the Entrance Hall and no-one went there either to greet them or to demand why they were at Hogwarts. They moved to the Great Hall, greatly relieved by the fact that everything seemed to be as it had been before. There were no walls missing, no debris and splattered rocks lying around, no dead bodies, not a whiff of that horrible and faint smell of blood... Everything was as it should be, peaceful, quiet.

Harry smiled at the castle, at the first place he had called his home, where he had some times been so happy and full of life. Just as they were about to reach Professor McGonagall's office, the four of them stopped dead on their tracks as they heard a barely audible sound coming from a classroom somewhere nearby.

Intrigued, they silently agreed on finding out what the sound was about. Following it, they went through several corridors, as it got louder and louder; apparently, it wasn't as close as they had expected, given the long walk they were going for.

Harry thought he had heard someone saying 'YES! Take that, Peeves! Yoo-hoo!' but he had quickly dismissed it, thinking he had been imagining things. But as they stood in front of the door where all the yelling and shouting came from, Harry had to admit that he had heard correctly. Gingerly opening the door, they nearly swore at the sight that met them.

Professor Trelawney and Peeves were in the middle of a football match, empty bottles of sherry magically congregated to form a goalpost at Peeves's end - who was playing Keeper - and Professor Trelawney in charge of the scoring, running amok with a crystal ball at her feet.

Neither Ginny, Harry nor Ron could hold it and burst out laughing, effectively putting a stop to the match, the Professor gaping at them like an underfed goldfish. Hermione, on the contrary, was shocked beyond her beliefs and continued to stare at the Divination teacher, vaguely wondering if she had previously underestimated the extent of her madness.

From what they could gather from what the professor told them in her drunken state, after the Battle she'd been left with only one crystal ball, but it was faulty because - Merlin knows why - she couldn't see anything when she gazed into the ball, trying to unravel the mysteries the future held with her Inner-Eye. Therefore, not being able to use it

anymore but not wanting to get rid of it until the replacements arrived, she started playing with it around... one thing led to the other... and Peeves and her ended up playing football matches with it in that abandoned classroom.

Hermione was horrified that a Hogwarts' teacher would so blatantly lack any decency, playing around with the poltergeist and drinking her brains out; but Harry, Ron and Ginny couldn't stop laughing at the absurdity of the situation.

It stopped being funny, however, when Professor Trelawney suddenly stiffened and collapsed to the ground. Quickly, they all bent down to help her; but Harry knew what was going to happen: her eyes would roll backwards, her voice would become raspy, unlike her normal wishy-washy tone –

'The triangle of the two paradoxes shall be destroyed at the falling equinox... A Liar, the base of the triangle, first to appear and first to evanesce... A King, who lurks in the shadows of the hearts and binds the geometry together... A Vanquisher unleashed, the vertex, fated to annihilate to win, to lose it all... the triangle of the two paradoxes shall be destroyed at the falling equinox...'

'Oh, bloody hell – not again!'

-oOoOoOoOo-

DISCLAIMER: Right, so I am JKR; that's why I stated in the previous chapter how much I have disliked the last of my published works, Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, and that's why I am writing this fic on this site under the alias of Vermouth. If you actually believe what I'm saying, I'll give you a bunch of singing geraniums for free.

A/N: done, I hope you enjoyed it. It isn't one of my favourite chapters, but it's only the beginning.

Many thanks to the FFNET authors Scurvy Ragamuffin, Sticky Wand and Malfoy Donkey: always so loyal, reading everything I've ever written and supporting me so much; and, on HPFF, many thanks to PasTerroriste, Anna Maria and Paul, dunno what I would've done without your support all these years. And of course to Hasufel, my wonderful beta-reader, without whom this would be plagued with my silly mistakes.

Until next time,

Cheers

Vermouth

Member of the Siriusan Order

REVISED: 14/04/2008 (Thanks, Hasufel!)

Chapter Three

The Truth Behind the Lies

Harry, Ron, Ginny and Hermione stood there, kneeling beside Professor Trelawney; some of them thinking what in Merlin's pants had that been all about; another one thinking how was it possible? Did the old fraud actually make a real prophecy? Another one from the group was just too stunned to even consider hypothesising; but the last one, the last one of the group knew what it was, he knew it was real, and he somehow knew that it was connected to him.

Twice the victim of a real Trelawney prophecy, either about him and Voldemort or made in front of him, Harry was fully aware of the consequences of it. Laughing mirthlessly, he should've guessed that it had been too good to last, that he was going to be somehow thrown again into another deathly dangerous adventure.

But the one-million-Galleon question was: what could it be about? Whom would he have to defeat this time? Because Voldemort was already dead – he had personally seen to it, he had almost died for the cause – and no-one could come back from the dead... But a wizard like Riddle was unlikely to come in the near future... And who was this liar person? Who did he know that lived in deceit?

The first answer that came to his mind was Snape. He had after all fooled the entire world about his true loyalties, he had been a spy – but he was dead. Who could it be? Pettigrew? No, he was dead, too. Rita Skeeter? Well, she did thrive on rumours and lies, but even in his mind it sounded ridiculous. Skeeter, however popular, wasn't somebody to be prophesied about.

It was clear for Harry that he was that – what did it say? – Oh, yes, that vanquisher unleashed... It all fit: his sudden new unleashed powers – the strange happenings around him... But still, what was it about?

Harry had to stop squeezing his brain to understand the meaning of that new wretched prophecy because at that moment Professor Trelawney woke up, turning her head around confusedly. 'What am I doing on the floor, my dears?'

'Er –professor, don't you remember what you've just said?' Ron asked tentatively. 'What you've just told us about a paradox, a triangle and three people?'

Professor Trelawney looked at him as if he had sprouted two extra heads. 'My, dear, you must have been dreaming... I said nothing about that nonsense... Triangles, triangles indeed – the only geometrical figure that is useless with the Inner-Eye...'

'But -'

'Ron, you had nodded off, too' said Harry in a warning tone, sending him a meaningful look; it would be all for the best if that particular information was kept to themselves, 'let's help the professor up,' he finished, lending Trelawney his own arm to help her stand up.

With some effort on his part, he managed to lift her to her feet. It would've been ten times easier if she hadn't been so completely wasted out of her mind, of course. Helping her to straighten her robes, they walked her to the staff room, guiding her through the corridors, making sure she wouldn't start talking to some suit of armour or something equally as stupid.

Finally leaving the professor in her Tower, they all went back down, heading to McGonagall's office; all of their feet hurting because Trelawney had stepped so many times on them.

They walked in silence, each immersed in the prophecy's words. They noticed neither the Fat Friar nor Nearly-Headless Nick greeting them, they were too focused on what they had heard. Slowly but

steadily, they approached the entrance of the Headmistress's office, but were surprised that they had forgotten they needed a password to enter.

'What can it be, some other sort of sweet?' asked Ron, staring inquisitively at the gargoyle in front of him.

Hermione shook her head. 'She's not like Professor Dumbledore, she'll have something different, and not nearly as funny,' she explained.

Thirty minutes of suggesting, saying, whispering and finally yelling different passwords nearly made Harry pick the nearest sword available and use it to stab that stupid gargoyle. Why couldn't McGonagall be as Dumbledore? Had she set a Muggle sweet password, Hermione would have figured it out in five minutes maximum! But, no, McGonagall had to be sane and therefore set a normal one... and that gargoyle was making things so much worse, sneering at them, it was almost like seeing the look of distaste Snape had always reserved for him alone, almost snake-like...

'Open up, dammit!' Harry hissed angrily.

To his utter amazement, the gargoyle froze and then sprung apart. Completely befuddled, he turned to the other three, who were just looking at him in various grades of wonderment. 'Er – what's wrong?' he asked gingerly.

'What did you say to the gargoyle?' asked Ginny, stepping towards the winding staircase that led to the office.

'Didn't you hear me? I just said "open up, dammit!" to it, nothing else' answered Harry in puzzlement.

'You were speaking Parseltongue, mate,' Ron told him.

‘Oh,’ said Harry intelligently.

Climbing up the stairs, Hermione’s brilliant mind came up with an explanation for that. ‘It’s likely that Salazar Slytherin wouldn’t be bothered to memorise Gryffindor’s passwords, so he probably charmed the portraits and statues to recognise his very own rare gift, Parseltongue. I suppose he either forgot to cancel the charm when he left the school or decided to leave it as it was for his descendants’ she explained, her cheeks red with talking at top speed at the same time she was doing some exercise.

‘That makes sense,’ said Ginny.

Harry nodded and proceeded to knock on the door. Suddenly, he felt nervous. Maybe it was because he had been in that office too many times when Dumbledore had been Headmaster, maybe because over two years before he had destroyed the vast majority of his Headmaster’s possessions, maybe because the truths he was probably about to discover, truths that not even in death Dumbledore had bothered to share with him... Or maybe he just felt nervous because; no reason at all.

‘Come in,’ said McGonagall inside her office after Harry had rapped on the door.

Pushing the heavy door open, they all stepped inside the Headmistress’s living quarters. It hadn’t changed that much, it only didn’t feel as welcoming as when Dumbledore had been Headmaster. It was more strict-looking and somewhat stiffer and severer than before: the comfy seats were now only rigid chairs, there was no funny silvery objects laying around, encouraging you to play with them. Well, Harry could say that the austere decoration of the office suited McGonagall just fine, strict and clever, not one to waste space on things that weren’t one-hundred percent practical.

‘Mr Potter, Ms Weasley, Ms Granger, Mr Weasley, what can I do for

you?’ she asked politely, conjuring up some spare chairs, all of them just as uncomfortable-looking as the one that was in front of her desk.

Sitting down, Hermione said ‘we wanted to talk to Professor Dumbledore’s portrait, ma’am.’

McGonagall arched an eyebrow and dropped the quill she had in her right hand. ‘May I enquire what about?’

Wringing her hands, she started talking about their nervousness at the weird things that seemed to happen around them: Harry’s powers, her theory about Voldemort’s followers’ deaths... Harry tuned out her voice and looked right through past Professor McGonagall to where the portrait he wanted to talk to was.

He couldn’t help the small smile that crept up to his lips at the sight of his old mentor sleeping soundly, using his own very shiny and very long beard as a pillow. He felt amused at the thought that Dumbledore would be now very bored indeed if McGonagall made him stay all the time in the same picture, not being able to have fun skipping around the castle and wreaking some havoc around. He thought that in his youth, Dumbledore must have been an excellent prankster, not unlike the Marauders, because most of the time he had a great deal of humour, because he always found hilarity in the everyday routine. He had been a very serious man, no point in denying that, but to someone like Harry who had spent so many hours with him and had been treated with such familiarity, Dumbledore had been one of the funniest and craziest people he had ever met.

Just then, the sleeping professor awoke and looking around, he winked at Harry, his piercing blue eyes twinkling. Merlin, he had missed that annoying look...

‘Er – Harry?’

He stopped spacing out at Ron's voice calling him. 'Yes?'

'We've just finished explaining everything to Professor McGonagall,' he informed him. Then, lowering his voice to a barely audible tone, he whispered, 'I think she's in shock; hasn't blinked for a full minute now.'

Turning his head to his Transfiguration teacher, Harry had to fight not to laugh at her. To put it mildly, Professor McGonagall looked as shocked as everyone would if Goyle had said something intelligent and nearly as white as Moaning Myrtle.

'You are sure this is real? Positive that it's not one of Sybill's – ah, how to say it? – short-sighted predictions?' she asked sceptically about one minute later.

Harry nodded his head vigorously. 'This is her third real prophecy, professor,' he stated clearly.

'Her – her third?' she asked, stunned.

Harry nodded again. 'The first one, you know very well about it. It was about Voldemort,' he paused and frowned at Ron, who still flinched at the sound of Riddle's self-fashioned name, 'and myself, made before I was born.'

'Sybill prophesied that?' she questioned, her surprise at the news increasing.

'Yes, in front of Dumbledore when he was interviewing her. He told me about it, that she went sort of stiff, her voice raspy and everything and just started reciting it. He thought it best to hire her after that to keep her safe. If word got out that she had been the Seer who had prophesied about Voldemort,' Ron flinched, 'and his possible downfall, she would be targeted.'

‘The second prophecy - that one was made in front of me after my Divination exam in my third year. It was about Pettigrew breaking free and reuniting Voldemort to help him gain his body back. That same night, we met Sirius,’ he said, with a note of lingering sadness on his godfather’s name, ‘and Pettigrew, who wriggled out of our hands and set out to look for Voldemort.

‘Today she made her third prophecy. I knew what was coming the moment she fell down and stiffened, I had seen her before doing the same thing. It was real, professor,’ he finished, a small pleading tone in his voice to make her understand, to make her see it for what it was, and not one of Trelawney’s fairy tales.

‘I think you should leave me alone with them for a few minutes, Minerva,’ said a little voice behind the Headmistress.

They all jumped in surprise at hearing Dumbledore’s unearthly voice. Turning around, Harry fixed his sight on his linen and magically painted face, unnerved at the deep look of gravity and seriousness on his usually lively and twinkling eyes. Every time he had seen that look upon the Headmaster’s face, something bad had either happened or was going to happen... Lord Voldemort’s return, Sirius’s death... He shivered at the question of what on Merlin’s name could be so serious to make the Headmaster adopt such a stern and firm tone.

Albeit reluctantly, Professor McGonagall left the office to the four students, who had almost at an inhuman speed forgotten all about her and gathered their seats around the portrait, anxiety etched on their faces.

‘I hoped and hoped every night that it wouldn’t be you, but it seems that all my prayers were for naught,’ he muttered, more to himself than to the four teens that were looking at him confusedly. Turning towards them, Harry was deeply uneasy at the lines of sadness and

worry all over Dumbledore's old and wrinkly face. 'What do you know about paradoxes?'

Perplexed at what seemed like a sudden change of conversation, Harry saw Hermione clear her throat and answered quietly. 'It's something thought to be impossible and incongruent, and yet, even though every ounce of logic states that it can't happen, it does happen.'

'Exactly,' said Dumbledore approvingly. 'If I am not much mistaken, this new prophecy will, to my utmost displeasure, confirm what I think this is about. If you could please -?'

There was no need to end the question, Hermione was quick on her feet and stood in front of the portrait, reciting word by word that wretched prophecy. Harry barely had time to marvel at the effectiveness of Hermione's outstanding brain when he saw her eyes bulging precariously. Dammit, she had understood something. Harry only hoped that she wouldn't race to the library and forget all about them.

Horribly unnerved after seeing Hermione sit down, her head shaking vigorously whilst she muttered disbelievingly 'no...it's impossible...no', Harry turned his head to his former Headmaster's portrait, trying to ignore the foreboding sensation growing rapidly in the pit of his stomach. He knew by

Ron's face that he was just as nervous as himself, and Ginny's hand squeezing one of his own until his fingers broke proved that she wasn't exactly calm, either.

They knew that something bad was about to happen. But they never suspected what they would find themselves thrown into.

'Several hundreds of years ago, an unexpected magical event took place where three wizards were summoned from their homes to

another place, exactly the same but completely different,' Dumbledore started, oblivious to the increasing confusion in the room, 'not many people know about the facts today, thought to be one of the many legends that belong to the past... However, all of Hogwarts' Headmasters have been told the truth about it, for it involved one of the Founders and Headmaster of the school, Godric Gryffindor...'

Alright, Harry was now one-hundred percent at sea. What was Dumbledore talking about? What was that about three wizards "being summoned from their homes to another place, exactly the same but completely different"? What was going to happen to him, was he going to be thrown in an alternate universe or something, like what happened in Dudley's science-fiction movies?

'All of the Headmasters in the long line of heads of this school were sworn to take an Unbreakable Vow that, not even in death, we were allowed to disclose the information until the next true Gryffindor was to face this task again...'

'Excuse me, sir, but what do you mean by "not even in death"?' asked Ginny, her hand still gripping Harry's firmly, 'what could possibly happen to someone who is dead?'

Dumbledore smiled kindly at her, 'If we were ever to disclose this information to the wrong person, if we are indeed dead, every proof of our existences would be erased, and what remained of us, our immortal souls, would turn into the foulest of the creatures...'

'Dementors' whispered Harry, horrified.

Choking, Ron asked feebly, 'so, all of the Dementors are former Hogwarts' Headmasters, sir?'

Dumbledore shook his head lightly. 'No, Mr Weasley. I believe that only two of them suffered that fate. Unfortunately, the origin of the

Dementors is so unknown, that no-one possesses the knowledge of how to destroy them. We know of two of them, but what about the rest?’

Harry took the end of that rhetorical question as his turn to speak. ‘But sir, what is this about a true Gryffindor? And how can you be sure you are telling this to the right person?’ he asked uncomfortably. No matter how angry and disappointed he had been in Dumbledore in the past, well, it belonged to the past and he most certainly wanted to remember him and not fight against him in a Dementor form.

Dumbledore smiled warmly at him. ‘Thank you for caring, Harry. If this eases your mind, please pick the Sorting Hat from the shelf.’

Put out by the bizarre demand, Harry nudged Ginny gently to make her release his hand from her tight grip and stood to his feet. Feeling stupid as Dumbledore asked him to put the Hat on his head, Harry waited until it spoke again to him, as it had done previously over the years.

‘Ah, so it’s you, then?’ the Hat whispered into his mind. ‘I thought it might be you, but there was before something that said you were to be a Slytherin... I can see it isn’t here anymore, you are a true Gryffindor, Mr Potter. Very well, then.’

Before Harry could say anything, the Sorting Hat contracted and released the Gryffindor Sword. Trying to avoid the little wizards on brooms that were zooming before his eyes, he picked the sword and

lifted the hat from the top of his head and placed it on the neat desk in front of him. Turning his head to the portrait, he felt something leave his head and drop to the floor, where it clunked softly.

Lowering down, he picked up what looked like a normal, small, golden ring. The only thing that made Harry suspect that it was much more than what it seemed was the fact that no ring that size could

weigh as much as a small child. Panting, he heaved it and placed it next to the Sorting Hat on McGonagall's table.

Looking at Dumbledore questioningly, he wondered where it was going. He saw from the corner of his eyes Ron shrugging helplessly and Ginny staring at the sword in awe. Hermione, however, looked pensive.

'Do you remember, Harry, that five years ago I told you that only a true Gryffindor could pull the sword out of the Sorting Hat?' Harry nodded at the question. 'Do you recall how worried you were when you told me that you should have been Slytherin until I showed you what was engraved on the sword just below the hilt?' Harry nodded again, uncomfortable at the enquiring looks he was receiving. 'Well, then look right now at the sword and tell me what it says.'

Expecting to read the name of Godric Gryffindor on it, Harry lifted the sword to his eyes. But just as he had done so and scanned over the hilt, he dropped it.

'What is it Harry? What happened?' said Ginny, who had stood up with Ron and was now by his side, holding to his arm tightly.

Not really being able to think clearly, he looked at her and whispered 'it says Harry Potter.'

If they had been expecting something, Harry could clearly see it wasn't that. Ginny's eyes opened widely while Ron bent down to examine it.

'Ouch! I can't touch it!' Ron protested a second later, straight on his feet, shaking his hand to get rid of the burning sensation in his hand.

'W-What?' Harry asked dumbly.

'I suspected not, Mr Weasley. The sword is now bound to Harry and

to Harry alone,’ said Dumbledore behind him. ‘Now that proves my theory. The ring you saw, Harry, we will leave that for the end of our explanation.’

Harry nodded numbly and sat down again, this time seeking for Ginny’s small comfort and not the other way round.

‘Well, Harry, now you won’t have to worry of my becoming Dementor – that is, alas, if I were truly dead,’ said Dumbledore enigmatically.

‘Excuse me, sir? Harry asked, believing that he had just heard wrong.

‘Don’t burden yourself with that at the moment Harry. I’ll explain it to you later,’ he said dismissively, sending him a look that clearly meant “you’ll know everything I do in due time”. ‘Well, now that’s settled, we can move to the purpose of this.’

‘Excuse me, sir, but what exactly do you mean by “Harry being a true Gryffindor”? And why does he have his name on the sword that used to belong to Godric Gryffindor?’ Ginny asked.

‘Why, Ms Weasley, I thought it was clear for all of you that Harry is Godric Gryffindor’s Heir.’

Clang.

Harry had dropped the sword again. If the surprises didn’t stop, he was sure to die of a heart attack that night. ‘Er- what?’

‘I thought you would have figured it out by now. No matter, then,’ said Dumbledore calmly, smiling kindly at the four teens’ shocked expressions. ‘A long time ago, it was said that Gryffindor’s Heir would have to deal with the same event as he had, but that it would be much more difficult – nearly impossible. Godric, afraid of what might happen to his heir, magicked the sword into making it reveal the

name of his heir as soon as he was prepared, binding it from then on only to him until he had fulfilled his destiny.'

'But how come Neville was able to get it out of the Hat if he wasn't this Gryffindor Heir – me?' asked Harry bewildered, wondering if he hadn't died yet out of shock.

'Two reasons, Harry. Firstly and most importantly, you were not ready before. The Voldemort you know was still to be defeated, you couldn't possibly face the task ahead of you then. Secondly, while Mr Longbottom may not be the Heir, he is nonetheless a Gryffindor descendant,' Dumbledore explained undeterred, as if he were talking about Flobberworms.

'W-What? N-Neville, a Gryffindor descendant?' Ginny asked disbelieving.

'Certainly. Mr Longbottom descends directly from Gryffindor's third child, Gertrude. The sword would recognise Gryffindor's blood through your friend's veins, logically,' the Headmaster explained patiently, his eyes twinkling slightly, 'I, however, am a direct descent of his second child, Gerald.'

Albus Dumbledore would have wanted nothing more than to be there at that precise moment alive, laughing at the four teens, who were gaping at him like fish, and then offer them a lemon drop. Alas, it would have been so hilarious. Unfortunately, at the present time and place, he was nothing more than the imprint of his living self.

'So that means I descend from his first child, sir?' Harry enquired, surprised at the fact that he was so distantly related to the Headmaster. He was probably related to him in another way, at least in a more recent way, for pure-blood families had always been mixed between themselves. Still, it was weird to think they had such an old tie.

‘No, Harry. That would be dear Minerva, who descends directly from the first-born, Gwendolyn. Yes, Harry,’ he added looking at his favourite student as he appeared to have remembered something, ‘in Minerva’s family, every girl born into it has Gwendolyn as her second name and every boy born into it bears Godric as his middle name.’

‘But then, how -?’

‘How can you be Gryffindor’s Heir, when you are descended from the fourth and last-born child, Gideon? Simple, very simple and very wise indeed,’ said Dumbledore with utter tranquillity, ‘Godric Gryffindor was a very quaint person. He disregarded many of the common pure-blood ways, believing them to be completely pointless and unfair. Instead of bequeathing his legacy to the first-born, he chose to do so to the one that truly descended from him – to the bravest. And incidentally, before you try to argue that you can’t possibly be his Heir because you think you aren’t brave enough, I can assure you my dear boy that I have never encountered another person with such a pure nerve and outstanding courage.’

‘Therefore, when it was said that a child of his blood would have to “redo what had to be done and undo what had to be undone”, he came up with a brilliant plan at the end of his days. He magicked the sword to recognise his one and true Heir, he created that unique ring and set uncountable rules and curses that were to bind all of the Hogwarts’ Headmasters to help you whenever it was your time.’

Several silent minutes passed as the four teens tried to absorb what they had been told.

‘Professor Dumbledore? What is this task you talk about, sir?’ Hermione asked. ‘It can’t be -?’

‘I am afraid you are correct, Ms Granger,’ Dumbledore nodded at her gravely. Turning again to look at Harry intently, he continued, ‘back to the beginning, when we were talking about paradoxes. Try to

imagine your deepest desire, Harry. Try to imagine what you would give for it to happen, try to see your magic flowing right through your veins, longing for it to happen,' he said to the confused wizard in a soothing voice.

Harry did as he was told, he tried to picture the image of his family's happy faces next to him, smiling and waving at him, just as they had done when he had looked in the Mirror of Erised for the first time. He could see himself again before it, his anxious and eager younger face as he stared intently at his mother's pretty face, his father's proud smile. He could feel inside him the longing, the craving for a family. He felt his heart constrict at the thought of it, allowing his emotions to overpower him. As his breath quickened, he felt his magic tingling all over his body, running wild through him.

He opened his eyes and the feeling was gone. Around, his three friends were looking at him curiously, wondering if he would tell them anything. 'I never felt my magic like that, sir,' said Harry, avoiding the inquisitive looks.

'No, you wouldn't have before you had been unleashed. Now try to imagine yourself in a moment of pure emotion, without any restraint upon yourself, unlike in this office. You would probably have let your magic free, am I right?' Harry nodded slightly and the professor continued. 'Could you then imagine what would have happened if, one the same night, an extraordinary wizard like yourself and another one let their magic unwind to answer the call of their deepest desires?'

'Er – something unusual would happen?' Harry replied uncertainly, wondering why Dumbledore always spoke in riddles.

'Precisely. Something extremely unusual: the creation of two separate worlds; one mingled with the other and yet completely unaware of each other until they were due to fuse back together,' Dumbledore finished explaining.

Thump.

Ginny had dropped unconscious to the floor. Hermione, the only one not rooted to the spot since she had had more time to assimilate that information than the two boys as she had guessed it correctly, bent down to revive Ginny. Carefully placing the nearly hysterical girl on her seat, she then went back silently to her chair, sitting down, waiting for the other ones to come back to the Land of the Articulate.

‘But sir, how can -?’

‘How can I know this? Simply by being able to have contact with my living self in that world.’

‘You – you are alive?’ Harry asked, even more shocked at that information than before.

‘I still breathe, if that’s what you mean.’

‘If you still breathe, sir? Where are you? What has happened to you?’ Hermione asked sharply, knowing that the way in which he had said those words was enough reason to worry.

‘Why, in Azkaban, of course. I have been there for the past six years.’

Just then Harry thought he was sleeping, having a very insane dream. Nothing made sense! He being the mythical Gryffindor Heir and Dumbledore in Azkaban? Come off it! If anything of that was true, then Voldemort was deep down a good person that secretly promoted the welfare of Muggles and skunks.

It was positively ridiculous! Totally illogical and surreal! All the weird things happening around Harry couldn’t possibly have anything to do with that far-fetched theory, could they? Just then, Harry wished for a fleeting instant he had never heard about the magical community and obliged Aunt Petunia’s desires to become a normal and ordinary

Muggle farmer. Life would've been so much easier, then...

Deciding that if it was some sort of twisted dream he might as well follow the flow, he tried to absorb all of what he had been told. So, if there was another world, one linked to this one and that he was the key to reunite them, who were the other two persons involved? What had occurred in the other reality that differed from his?

'Er, Professor Dumbledore, who are this King and this Liar, if they are the other two who started this?' Harry inquired.

'Alas, to that I can only guess. I am quite positive the so-called King is none-other than Lord Voldemort himself.'

Harry gasped. No... it couldn't be... Lord Voldemort, alive again, when he had just disposed of him? Was he going to be thrown again into his former nightmare? 'But how?'

'From what I have been able to recollect since my passing in this world from my other self's weakened mind, Lord Voldemort didn't lose his body on that Hallowe'en night when he first tried to kill you. It seems, unfortunately, that he did manage to dispose of you.'

Silence met those words. How could Harry be dead?

'But sir, my mother?' he asked anguished.

Harry could've sworn he saw a sad smile on Dumbledore's face for a vanishing instant. 'Neither your father nor your mother died that night. For all I know, they could be still alive.'

Harry felt his heart swell like a balloon. His mother and father – alive? It was too much to ask, too much to take in. He had always been raised as Harry the orphan, the parentless child; but now, there was a tiny and minuscule chance that his wish would be granted, that he would have a family... Maybe this weird dream wasn't going to be so

bad after all...

‘I can only think that Voldemort’s deepest desire was that you had been murdered that night. His unmatched skill and power, along with some other person who might’ve wished from the bottom of the heart something related to the events of that fateful Hallowe’en night seventeen years ago, triggered the splitting of two separate realities in which your parents lived and you died.’

Harry just stood there in silence, trying with all his might to understand that piece of information. So, translating Dumbledore’s twisted words into normal plain English, Voldemort, the most powerful wizard of all times had used all of his power and emotions into desiring that Harry had been killed. Then, serving as a focus of that power, another person was brought into the picture, probably wishing that he had either been killed or that his parents lived through that terrifying night. But now, since it was a space paradox and there was only one Harry and one Lord Voldemort, the timelines must merge again to balance themselves. That, all of that, only meant one simple thing – the prophecy hadn’t yet been fulfilled: neither can live while the other survives...

‘As for who the Liar is, I might be wrong, but I would hazard a guess at either Professor Severus Snape or Peter Pettigrew.’

‘Wormtail?’ Harry sputtered, shocked.

‘Yes Harry, Wormtail. Scared and weak as he was, he had still been at some point a friend of the infamous Marauders and nothing – nothing, can ever erase that sort of bond, whatever we might turn into

as we grow older. You must understand that although at some point Peter’s loyalties changed to lie somewhere else, a part of him would never forget the friendship he had shared with his former school friends.

‘I told you four years ago that there would come a day when you would be very happy that you had saved Pettigrew’s life. I think that day has already come.’

Harry then remembered that night, when he had first met Sirius. Maddened by grief, believing his godfather a traitor and the cause of his parents’ deaths, he was craving for Sirius to be slaughtered, to suffer as he had suffered... But he had lost his nerve, he hadn’t killed him when he had the chance, and then Professor Lupin snatched his wand right from under his nose, stopping him from attacking Sirius. But then, the strange and seemingly impossible about the truth of what happened to Lily and James came out... Peter Pettigrew was revealed as the traitor and Sirius had been an innocent man framed for his former friend’s crimes... Sirius and Professor Lupin had wanted to murder Pettigrew right then – but Harry had stepped in against it, he didn’t want them to become killers just for that rat... he had saved his life, he had thought that he would be able to live with his father’s best friend for one glorious hour... but then Pettigrew escaped, it was a full moon... he reunited with Voldemort and aided in his resurrection because Harry had spared his pitiful life...

And Dumbledore, Dumbledore had told him the following thing that it didn’t make it his fault if Lord Voldemort rose again... that there would be a day when he would be happy to have saved Pettigrew... had this day already come?

‘What would’ve happened if I hadn’t stopped Sirius and Professor Lupin from murdering Pettigrew that night at the Shrieking Shack?’ Harry asked.

Dumbledore sighed heavily. ‘Alas, as to that, I can only guess. You may have been thrown into the other world too soon for you to succeed; you may never have had the need to know this since the two timelines would’ve become independent worlds until they finally crumbled... The result of it is unknown, but, thankfully, none of that

has come to happen since Pettigrew only died when you were almost prepared and Voldemort had little time left in life...'

Harry drew his breath in sharply, his numb brain finally admitting he wasn't going to wake up from that bizarre dream, that he was, in fact, awake and that all of it, however unlikely and incomprehensible, was real. 'Where do we go from here?' said Harry, resigned to meet his fate, again.

'You will somehow trigger your way into that reality at the falling equinox, or, to put it simply, the next twenty-first of September. What should you do until that day? Study, learn, practice, bring your newfound powers under control, rest and train.'

'Next twenty-first of September? But that's only three months away! I can't possibly be prepared enough by that time!' Harry protested.

'Ah, but this is where the ring comes in,' said Dumbledore calmly.

'The ring?' Harry asked intelligently.

But before Dumbledore could say anything about what was likely to be some astounding magical properties that jewellery piece held, Hermione interrupted them. 'Professor Dumbledore – can we go with him?'

For some time, Harry had almost forgotten that his friends were there with him, it was almost like one of those private lessons he had had with the Headmaster in his sixth year, when they had delved into Lord Voldemort's past. But when Hermione asked that particular question, it hit him that it was something he had to do alone... Ironically enough, when he had been first presented with the task to destroy Voldemort and all of his Horcruxes, he had been so set to do it solitarily... but now, after

everything that had happened, after everything they had lived

through together, he didn't want to go all on his own. As egoistical and selfish as it sounded, he wanted Ron's loyalty, Hermione's brilliance and Ginny's unwavering support with him.

'It can be done, I suppose, but I will not deceive you into believing it will be an easy feat to accomplish. Anyhow, no-one that lives in both worlds will be able to travel from one to the other, lest the paradox succumbs and both realities are shattered,' Dumbledore explained quizzically.

'So, we are alive, sir?' Hermione asked.

'You, Miss Granger, I do not know whether you lived or not. The last time I saw you was at the end of your first year, when Voldemort regained his body by using the Philosopher's Stone.'

'Wait – Voldemort regained his body? But I thought you said that he had managed to kill me and stayed intact!' Harry said, not understanding anything at all.

'I most certainly did say so. However, I did not continue with the story. From what I succeeded to extract from my imprisoned mind, Voldemort did, in fact, kill you, Harry. He then set to find the other possible prophecy child, Neville Longbottom...'

'No,' said Ginny tearfully.

'I am afraid it's true, Ms Weasley. Voldemort sought the Longbottoms, but he encountered the same problem: they were under the Fidelius Charm and only their Secret Keeper could reveal their whereabouts. It seems that I didn't know who this person was, the only thing I know is that the family who was thought to know his identity was tortured and all of the members disposed of. Seven days later, the Longbottoms were dead. I only did then what I thought I would never be able to do, I cast myself the Killing Curse on Voldemort.'

‘No...’

‘Who was this family?’ asked Harry, the pit of his stomach growing.

Dumbledore looked at him and silently confirmed his suspicions, knowing that he wasn’t going to like it, fully aware that this would push Harry’s hatred towards Voldemort even further.

‘The Weasleys.’

‘NO!’ they all cried.

The Weasleys... Harry’s adoptive family, tortured and killed because Riddle had wanted the name that would lead him to his next target, so he would become indestructible, undefeatable, immortal forevermore...

Anger fuelled through him, his blood boiled within his veins, his heart beating so quickly its sounds were undistinguishable... He rose to his feet and raced to the nearest window. He raised his hand up in the air and let out a strangled yell, his eyes again midnight blue, inhuman.

A beam of black light emerged from the palm of his raised hand up into the air and exploded in a deafening cry, making the castle and its grounds shake.

Exhausted, he turned around angrily. The sight of Hermione comforting Ron and Ginny crying silently in her hands made him forget all of his anger, his eyes turning again to their normal emerald green colour. He ran to Ginny and pulled her into his lap awkwardly, trying to comfort her as best as he could.

‘He will pay,’ he whispered venomously. ‘I’ll make him bleed...’

The only sounds that could be heard for the following minutes were the feeble sobs of Ginny and Ron, while the other two tried to lift

some of their pain by just being there for them, Dumbledore looking at the four teens brokenly. So much suffering, so much anguish, and only for that useless tool: power...

Harry locked his sight with his former mentor's face while he held Ginny tightly in his arms, letting her cry freely. 'What do I have to do now?' he asked, a hard, blazing rage burning in his eyes.

Professor Dumbledore nodded gravely. 'That ring over there is one of the results of Rowena Ravenclaw's extraordinary brainpower. Set to help Gryffindor's Heir, she designed this artefact so that anyone who sought to help you could pour in it what you would need – knowledge.

'As soon as you put it on your finger, your brain will undergo an intense period of stress where it will try to absorb everything you will learn, but unfortunately, it will take a toll on you and you will be unconscious for a week or two,' Dumbledore explained.

'So this is like a super intensive crash course, sir?'

'Yes and no. It is most certainly insanely intensive and sudden, but it will become literally a part of you. All my knowledge, all of Gryffindor's knowledge as well as many other wizards' knowledge who wanted to support you will be enclosed deep within your mind; but it will be up to you to dominate it and to learn other things that none of us would dream of, magic that Voldemort holds with such high esteem...'

'The darkest of the Dark Arts,' Harry concluded.

'Precisely,' Dumbledore finished, a defeated tone in his voice. 'I'm so sorry it had to be you, Harry. I only wanted you to rest and have your life ahead of you...'

Harry shook his head. 'This time, professor, there is no way I can

blame you. What has to be done will be done,' he added, disentangling himself from Ginny's firm embrace. Slowly, he rose to his feet and walked towards Professor McGonagall's desk, where he had placed the ring before. Looking at it intently, he couldn't see on it anything out of the ordinary, save for a strange sensation that told him to claim it as his, to unite it with his body as if it were a part of him.

'Don't just do it right now,' Ron pleaded.

Harry turned around, confused. 'What?'

Ron spun his head towards the portrait and whispered in the lowest voice he could muster. 'Professor, if that's alright with you, could we spend this evening together in the castle as if we were normal teenagers, please?'

Dumbledore smiled warmly at them. 'Of course you may. I shall speak to Minerva to send a note to your parents telling them that you will spend the night here at the castle,' he answered gently. 'Go and enjoy your evening, but Harry, please come back tomorrow.'

He nodded at the Headmaster and waved goodbye at him, turning to leave in silence, hoping that his mind wouldn't black out after all that had been revealed that day to him. Only two thoughts remained clear in his blurry and confused brain.

His parents may be alive.

Voldemort would suffer his wrath.

'You know what this means, don't you? Ron asked him suddenly, breaking the line of his dangerous thoughts.

Harry sighed. 'Yes – it isn't over,' he answered tiredly.

To Harry's surprise, Ron shook his head energetically. 'No, it means you and I are getting drunk tonight.'

He couldn't help it, he smiled to that statement. Trust Ron to come up with something like that to cheer them up. But he doubted anything could lift his spirits at the moment, too much was at risk.

His parents may be alive.

Voldemort would suffer his wrath.

-oOoOoOoOo-

Of course, Harry had been dead wrong.

Drinking did cheer him up alright.

Ron had decided to sneak into Hogsmeade and buy some bottles of Firewhiskey at the Hog's Head, the dodgy pub Albus Dumbledore's brother ran. Being a complete inexperienced at the fine art of getting wasted, Ron bought too many bottles and therefore ended up without a single spare Knut in his pockets.

At first, Hermione had vetoed the idea, but after Ron had mocked her, saying that she was so strict and such a two-goody shoes she'd never be able to drink, her eyes burned defiantly and she picked the nearest bottle and started nearly devouring its contents directly. Harry thought it was very unwise and idiotic to provoke Hermione in such a way; saying that she wasn't capable of doing something was suicide.

Ron had also complained loudly about Ginny not being of age yet, that she was too young and innocent to drink alcohol. Of course, after Ginny oh-so-sweetly threatened him that if he continued being such an imbecile, she would contact Rita Skeeter and tell her everything about the story behind Ron, a zipper and a stuffed rabbit

named Froylan. Evidently, Ron had instantly changed his mind and said loudly that he gave her his permission to drink until she passed out.

Soon enough, the four of them were sloshed out of their minds. Curiously enough, it was Ginny who could best hold her alcohol whilst Ron, Harry and Hermione, no matter in how many deadly adventures they had been through, were saying nonsense by their second drink.

‘Because we MUST promote equality and fairness between species!’ Hermione hollered. ‘Aren’t we the same as elves, Hinkypunks and ferrets? Aren’t we?’

‘But tha’ Bollocks Ploy – no, Polskoff’s Coy was tooootally ‘mazing!’ Ron answered. ‘Don cha ‘gree, ‘Arry?’ he asked a table near him.

‘I used to stare at the Map when we were looking for the House Crups, wondering if you were bathing,’ Harry slurred.

‘You look good enough to eat, Harry... mind if I bite you?’ Ginny asked dizzily.

Ron, not paying any attention to all the laws Hermione wanted to modify when she became Head of the Magical Law Enforcement Department, strangely found himself being directed towards the

kitchens by Hermione, who was ready to lead the House Elves into revolution. Long live the House Elf Liberation Front!

So that left Harry and Ginny alone, a bottle of Firewhiskey in front of them and wasted out of their minds. It was a funny sight, actually. To see the Boy-Who-Lived, the Man-Who-Conquered, the Saviour of the Wizarding World staring absent-mindedly at a table, wondering if it was just his imagination or if it could really talk. Funny how it sounded like Ginny. No, Harry shook his head groggily, it was

impossible, because Ginny wasn't a table, right? No, Ginny was as un-tabl-ish as they come.

'Haaaawy, you listening?' said Ginny as she crawled on the floor and placed herself face to face with Harry. 'I don't care if you must fight again, you won't be dicking me! I'll Bogey-Bat Curse you!'

'Ginny, you are alive!' he cried ecstatic, grabbing her hands in a very un-Harryish way.

'Course I am, silly. 'N you won't be going with not me this time!' she said ferociously. 'You'll let me go with you or I'll tie you to my bed! Mmm, that's a pleasant thought,' she added dreamily.

Harry smiled goofily. If he hadn't been in such a state, he would've been blushing till next Tuesday, but, seeing that his brain had become mush, he was very happy at the thought of being tied to Ginny's bed.

At that moment he didn't really care if he had to defeat Volleydoor again. That was his name right? Well, in any case, the important thing was Ginny and a bed, not that Dark Turd. His brain was too fried to think about anything more complicated than breathing, and talking anymore about the weird situation he was going to face in the near future was certainly classified as "complicated". Still, a part of him couldn't let go of it, no matter how much at a loss he was.

'Gonna be philosophing all the time or are you in the mood to have some fun?' Ginny asked before she, literally, attacked Harry.

Ah, the wonders of making out. He didn't know if it was fuelled by the copious amounts of Firewhiskey, but Harry felt extremely alive and very much in the mood to continue snogging Ginny senseless, thank you very much.

Pushing her down beneath him on the warm floor of the common

room, he kissed her with all he had, with everything she was to him. He became more daring, he wanted to forget his past-self, too scared and too shy to try anything else apart from chaste kisses. He wanted to explore new things with her, to let her know what she meant to him, although he wasn't sure of how much yet. He wanted to leave the timid boy aside and be a man in every aspect of his life, not just to fight Dark Lords.

He wanted to know what life was.

Slowly, carefully, he began to lift her shirt, his hands inching to get rid of it faster while his brain told him the opposite. He was happy to know that the alcohol in his mind was steadily being erased, and that he was more and more in control. Finally, he managed to free Ginny from her top and he took a few seconds to look at her.

He lowered down and kissed her throat while she pushed her head backwards, moaning his name. Grinning against her skin, he placed one of his hands on her stomach and caressed it gently, while the other went to unclasp her bra.

There was no other word to describe her – she was beautiful.

He lowered his head and kissed that new skin inexpertly, thrilled to hear her small moans and whimpers, feeling himself weaken as all of his blood focused on one sole part of his body. Tentatively, he caressed and kissed that part of Ginny he had never seen before.

With a force he didn't know she had, she made him roll over and straddled his hips. He could feel every inch of his skin burning under her touch; his body longing to feel hers without any of the few garments that stood between them. A sudden rush ran through his veins as Ginny lifted his shirt and started kissing his bare chest and abdomen.

He could feel all of his nerves tingling, and his trousers seemed

especially uncomfortable at the moment. Longing as he was to get rid of any clothing that separated their two heated bodies, his more and more sober mind told him he didn't want it to be like this, that it wasn't right, that they needed to sort things out before.

Cursing his rational mind, he looked up at Ginny who was fumbling with his belt. 'Ginny – slow down,' he managed to whisper, fearing the effects she was having on his body.

She lifted her head and looked at him, unfocused. 'Why?'

Harry narrowed his eyes as he tried to come up with a decent excuse so as to explain why they shouldn't be pushing it further. As much as he wanted to, it didn't feel right to do it on a floor, fearing someone would walk in on them, both so wasted they might regret it later...

'Not here, not like this,' he said finally.

She looked at him in a way that would've made Minerva McGonagall proud. He felt himself squirming underneath her, torn between the pain coursing through his body and the unease that crept into his heart due to her piercing stare.

Rolling off him, she picked her shirt silently and pulled it over her head, not even acknowledging Harry's presence.

'Er – Gin?' he asked tentatively.

'What?' she replied harshly.

Harry sighed in defeat. How on earth should he explain why they should stop? Bloody hell, he wanted to continue! It wasn't as if he wasn't excited, his lower body was enough to prove that! 'I just don't want it to be like this, when we aren't in our best state of mind, on a floor...'

To his surprise, Ginny smiled warmly at him and kissed him lightly. Pulling herself up from the rug and offering her hand to him, she said. 'Alright, let's go and have some sleep. But you and I, Mr Potter, will need to talk,' she said in a voice that clearly told him that she wouldn't approve of any disagreement.

Later that night, Harry sighed against Ginny's head. While he had managed to stop, she had point-blank refused to sleep alone that night. Knowing that she wouldn't accept anything else, Harry rushed to the bathroom to get a cold shower.

Running his fingers through her hair, he wondered where this was going. Would they come with him in his adventure or would he succeed to keep them safe? It was a tad hypocritical of him to make them stay away from danger when he himself would have to face worse than before, but he couldn't shake away the feeling of despair that crept through his body at the thought of Ginny injured from battle...

Don't think about that, he chided himself.

Focusing solely on Ginny's comforting weight on him, he wondered how life would be with her, without any threats...

He could picture himself years later, reading the newspaper with a small child on his knee trying to get his attention muttering nonsense. Behind him, Ginny was resting on a sofa, playing with a black-haired toddler that was laying on her chest. They seemed so happy, so relaxed it was almost foreign to Harry.

And yet, he wanted nothing more than it to be true.

'Someday...'

Smiling, Harry went to sleep.

-oOoOoOoOo-

The following morning, Harry thought he had been tortured. He felt vindictively happy that Ron, the one who had led them to Firewhiskey and therefore hangover, was suffering just as much as he was.

Fortunately, Ron and Hermione hadn't caught Harry sleeping with Ginny. He shuddered at the thought of how worse his headache could have been if Ron had seen them sleeping together the previous night. Best friend or not, the yelling and shouting would have been incredible.

Clumsily, he reached the Head's office, trying to prepare himself. Hermione had convinced him to let them come with him because, if he was going to be knocked out, it would be nice if he was transported into some bed and not left on the floor to catch pneumonia. Grudgingly, he had to admit she was right.

And so it was, flanked by his friends and under the sight of his former mentor, that Harry picked the infamous ring, bracing himself for what was to come.

'What has to come, will come; and we will face it when it does,' he said as he put the ring on his finger, smiling slightly and at Hagrid's wise words.

At first he noticed nothing different, but then he felt a tingling sensation starting from his hand and quickly reaching all of his body. As if in slow motion, his breaths quickened and his chest constricted. He grabbed a chair nearby to stop himself from falling unto the floor, his lungs in need of air.

Oblivious to the worried looks of his friends, he closed his eyes, hoping the pain would be over soon.

He barely noticed the shouts around him when he fell to the ground;

he could only hear his ragged breath, his furious heart beating wildly inside of him, sense the fog clouding his thoughts...

And then, the world turned black and Harry felt nothing more.

DISCLAIMER: I is Dobby, sir. I is wanting to telling you sir that I is owning Master Harry Potter sir and all of his socks. I is also telling you that I is being Lord He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named and I is being Buckbeak, too. I is telling you, great reader, that Kristen Black is nosing into my affairs because she is inventing things about me, sir.

A/N: alright, for those who haven't understood the disclaimer; basically, since Dobby is now Lord Voldemort, he is pissed off at me because I am writing about him and his own property, Harry Potter.

If you are wondering whether I am mental, I can only say in my defence that it's three am and that I've been studying all bloody day, so my poor brain doesn't work in a coherent way. But yes, I won't deny that I am insane.

Anyway, many thanks to all you lovely reviewers: Lucie, Malfoy donkey, Anna Maria, Pas Terroriste, Scurvy Ragamuffin, Paul, Sticky Wand; and my wonderful beta-reader, Hasufel... you all know who you are, and YOU RULE!

Please review.

Cheers

Vermouth

Miembro de la Orden Siriusana

REVISED: 14/04/2008 (You rule, Hasufel!)

Chapter Four

The Forsaken Path of a Lonely Warrior

The feeling of warmth is one of the most deceiving sensations a person can know. It can make you feel loved, safe, protected, cosy... but it can also lure you into a false security, butter you up enough until you let your guard down and then strike you with such a force that you won't be able to rise again. It can create an environment where everything is almost perfect - dream-like, you might even say - until it becomes your undoing, when reality crashes down on you, breaking you from inside out.

But feeling warm is what makes us human.

However, for a nearly eighteen year-old boy who never knew what it was like until he was eleven, who amidst the warmth could feel nothing but despair and fear, who broke free out of the nightmare that engulfed almost all of his dreams and aspirations, everything was different.

But it didn't matter how he was raised; it didn't matter if he had been brought up to believe he would be nothing in life, because no-one would ever care for him. None of it was important because none of it was true. He did learn what it was to be hugged by a mother, supported by a friend, worshipped as a hero and kissed by a lover.

If only his nightmare would end, Harry Potter would be the happiest man alive.

But on the morning at the end of July, Harry Potter didn't give a damn about anything. He stirred slightly when he felt a ray of sunshine creeping its way towards his face. Stretching, he opened his eyes confusedly, wondering where the blazes he was. Blinking repeatedly as he grabbed his glasses and set them on the bridge of his nose, he glanced around. Oh, he was at Hogwarts, right.

Sighing tiredly, he pulled the covers off him, standing up ready to get dressed, wondering how in Merlin's name he managed to find himself in so much trouble. Yep, he was bloody doomed; there was no other way to describe it. It was completely insane, but, apparently, he was fated to be thrown into insane situations, he only hoped his mind would remain intact after it, although he wouldn't bet all his money on it. Guess he would have just to cross his fingers and hope everything would turn out alright.

Harry walked to the nearest window, crossing his arms. Apparently, someone had moved him to his old dormitory and placed him to sleep in his old Hogwarts' bed. Merlin he missed those days, when he and Ron stayed there and talked about lessons, Quidditch Snape and girls among other things. He couldn't believe how much time had passed since he first stepped into the room, so many things had happened... A small smile crept upon his lips when he saw Hagrid through the window glass, trying to keep another of his monstrous creatures under control.

Scratching his head, he turned around and started looking for some clothes; he didn't think it'd be a good idea to walk around the castle in his underwear. Although he was positive Ginny wouldn't mind one single bit, he feared what Professor McGonagall's reaction might be if she saw him practically nude. A sudden blush came over his face as he wondered who had stripped him to his boxers the previous

night. He didn't know what was worse, Ginny or Hermione doing it or the disturbing picture of Ron undressing him. Shaking his head to get rid of the bad mental images, he pulled some trousers on.

Knock. Knock.

'Come in' he said, pulling up his zipper.

Expecting Ron, he turned his back on the door and picked up a white

shirt that was lying at the end of his bed. He was very much surprised when a pair of slender arms surrounded him around his bare middle and a head fell over just below his scapula. If it was his best friend, it was most definitely a very un-Ronish and disturbing thing to do.

Looking over his shoulders, he saw that, thankfully, it wasn't Ron who was hugging him close but Ginny. A small tinge of red appeared on his cheeks at the thought of her closeness. Sure, it was perfectly innocent. But being held like that, the simple intimacy of the gesture was something completely new to Harry; awkward, yes, but comforting and just right in an odd way.

'Morning handsome. So nice of you to wake up,' said Ginny behind him, not letting him out of her firm grip.

'How long have I been out for?' he asked, putting his own arms around hers unwittingly.

'Ten days. How do you feel?'

'Weird. It just like when you have something on the tip of your tongue but you can't remember what it was. D'you know what I mean?' he tried to explain.

While he felt Ginny nodding against his bare shoulders, he pondered over his new state of mind. Admittedly, his previous notions of being possessed by that ring were ridiculous; he basically felt the same way: he was still only Harry, not some body harbouring the thoughts of countless wizards who had passed away a long time ago. And yet, there was something unnerving in his brain. It was as if he had some sort of trunk in the back of his head, waiting for him to open it and unravel its contents. The thing was, he didn't have a key to unlock it. But then again, he had some time to get through it with Dumbledore. He thought that if he went step by step with the new information stored into his mind, he'd be able to learn many new things that he would need in his near future, although he would still need to acquire

some books on the Dark Arts, something he was very much unwilling to do.

He watched in fascination as Ginny's hands roamed up and down his chest, wondering when they had taken the steps to get so intimate. Blushing, he was reminded of the night in which they had got drunk and, if his leaky memory served him right, they had definitely crossed that boundary. Of course, it may have just been a wild fantasy of his, but somehow he reckoned it had been very much real. He gulped and tried to wipe the image of her bare chest off his mind.

'You'll get through this,' she said soothingly, briefly kissing his shoulder.

Harry sighed in defeat. 'I only want all this to stop... It's too surreal, too frightening; and I don't know if I have the strength to go through it again,' he whispered sadly. 'Sometimes I wish I had gone to Stonewall High Institute as my aunt and uncle wanted, live as a Muggle...'

Ginny held him tighter. 'Do you really mean that? You wouldn't have met Ron or Hermione... You wouldn't have ever played Quidditch... I would've died in the Chamber,' she said softly, her cheek contacting his back.

Harry looked horrified. 'No – I didn't mean to say that. It's just that life would've been so much easier...'

She laughed bitterly. 'Probably. But I don't think you would've been very happy with the Dursleys.'

He shook his head. 'No, you are right. Everything would've been so bloody normal, and steady and ordinary... Talk of the devil – where are they? Have they already been taken out of the safehouse?'

He didn't need to see her face, but he knew a very mischievous glint

was currently taking over her eyes and a pixie smile possessing her lips. He shivered at the thought of what could've happened to the Dursleys if Ginny was smiling in that way, as if she had just Bat-Bogeyed Malfoy.

'They are still hiding in a magical safehouse,' she said. He could swear he could hear her grinning madly at the thought of his only living relatives terrorised by flying teapots and mad-mouthed ghouls.

'You mean they have no idea that they can get out of hiding?' he asked, feeling giddy for some unknown reason.

She laughed against his skin. 'Nope. McGonagall convinced Kingsley Shacklebolt to leave them alone until you gave the order to release them. Of course, she didn't say it exactly like that – something along the lines of "Harry's their relative, it he should be the one who brings them back, Kingsley". But we all know McGonagall loves you and that she never agreed with Dumbledore when he placed you on their doorstep,' she explained.

Harry grinned goofily. It wasn't really some vindictive torture – they hadn't been placed under the Cruciatus Curse, after all – but it still felt darkly pleasurable that he was getting some payback on the Dursleys, for all those years of starvation, neglect and on the rare occasion, physical abuse.

Remembering those days at Privet Drive brought a frown on Harry's face. Sure, he now knew the truth behind the actions, the jealousy that drove them to despise him just because he was something more wondrous than they could ever imagine being. But it was still wrong. Now, being seventeen and having lived through a war, he could not define himself as innocent; but could a mere four year-old toddler be accused and punished for sins that he was too young to understand?

Ginny released him from her ferocious grip and planted herself in front of him, trying to search through his face for any emotional

gesture that might clue her into his thoughts. She sighed frustrated; there was nothing that could betray his feelings into letting her know what that noble ponce brain of his was up to. She could only shiver at the sight of Harry's cold demeanour, his eyes not even taking in her presence, his far away expression, going through some mental torture that she was positive he hadn't dared to share with any of his friends.

Rubbing her left eyebrow against her finger in a rather harsh way, she went to pick up a shirt for him. As much as she enjoyed the view, no matter how thin Harry was, it would do them no good if he caught a cold. Unfortunately for her, the only shirt she could find was a simple plain white one on top of his bed. Clicking her tongue distastefully, she handed it to Harry rather forcefully, who just looked at her blankly for a few seconds and then pulled it on over his head, ruffling his bird-nest of a hair even more pronouncedly.

She inhaled sharply at his apparent lack of communication. It was one of the things that she disliked most about him, his uneasiness at sharing thoughts with people around him. While he had most certainly stopped being the shy boy she had met at King's Cross nearly seven years before, he still wasn't as open as she wished he would be. She supposed there were some things that were just so deeply ingrained in his soul, such heavily marred scars, that no amount of time could ever heal.

She sighed.

It was going to be a long day.

-oOoOoOoOo-

Come three o'clock in the afternoon and Harry was sitting again on a rigid chair at the Headmistress' office. Wondering briefly whether he had beaten the record of most frequent visitor to the Head's office, he rubbed his scar with the back of his hand tiredly, hoping to end the

meeting and get back to bed as soon as possible.

Morning hadn't been an easy affair. McGonagall had summoned Kingsley, the Weasleys and the rest of the Order to explain the new situation in which Harry was in. Of course, at first there had been nothing but rounds and rounds of disbelief, but as time passed and McGonagall's and Dumbledore's voices explained everything, disbelief turned into sadness, and sadness turned into despair.

Harry couldn't blame them, but he certainly didn't like the sympathetic looks he was receiving from some members of the Order of the Phoenix. True, it didn't seem quite fair that, after all he had gone through, he would have to relive it again, facing his immortal enemy once more, and risk losing even more than before. But Harry had already accepted it; no matter where he went, trouble would always follow him.

Of course, when Ron said that they would accompany Harry wherever he went, Molly Weasley had been outraged. Wanting to soothe his headache, Harry drew circles with his fingers over his temples while trying valiantly to tune out Mrs. Weasley's barking tones. It seemed that no matter how logical and well explained Mr. Weasley's efforts to calm his wife down were, she just decided it was high time to go on a shouting spree and render the rest of the people in the office deaf. So damn nice and altruistic of her.

Dumbledore said that the choice of each path resided in every person, and no-one had the right to decide for another human being. Seeing that his cool reasoning and well-constructed sentences did nothing to soothe Molly Weasley, he said that, although it was highly unlikely anyone would be able to go with Harry, it wouldn't do them any wrong if they started taking serious in-depth studies and training on a daily basis.

All too soon, a shouting match between the remaining members of the Order of the Phoenix started while the four teenagers looked at

each other helplessly, at a loss at what to do. After all, if a group of apparently mature adult wizards and witches started behaving like a bunch of spoiled brats throwing a tantrum, what could four young wizards do to stop hell from breaking loose?

‘I will NOT accept it -’

‘They are only children -’

‘This isn’t about you -’

‘He has defeated You-Know-Who!’

Blood pulsed through his veins, worsening his headache, as the screams and yells became louder and louder. His heart began pumping fast, as anger cursed through him while he listened to the adults talk about them as if they were meaningless, spoiled and pampered children, as if they had done nothing to help to win the war against Voldemort...

Suddenly, an unfamiliar force surged within his body, intoxicating his whole mind, burning through his veins, consuming him in will. He had to fight again, fight for everything he wanted, for everything he cared about, fight to win or to lose it all... And he’d be damned if he’d give up so easily!

...Neither can live while the other survives...

‘THAT’S ENOUGH!’ he hollered, standing up.

The room went unanimously quiet, fear condensing through the air as the windows began to rattle, magical energy flooding from Harry’s body, his hands shaking in anger.

‘NONE OF YOU RESCUED THE PHILOSOPHER’S STONE FROM VOLDEMORT AT THE AGE OF ELEVEN! NONE OF YOU KILLED A

BASILIK WHEN YOU WERE TWELVE! NONE OF YOU GOT RID OF A HUNDRED DEMENTORS AT THIRTEEN! NONE OF YOU WERE TIED TO A GRAVESTONE AND STABBED TO MAKE VOLDEMORT RISE AGAIN! NONE OF YOU DESTROYED VOLDEMORT'S IMMORTALITY! NONE OF YOU WILLINGLY LET HIM HIT YOU WITH THE KILLING CURSE! NONE OF YOU DESTROYED HIM! NONE OF YOU HAD THE POWER TO VANQUISH THE DARK LORD!

Pacing up and down like an enraged lion, he clenched his fists tightly, his eyes bloodshot due to his outburst, oblivious to the small frail cracks on the windows, on the table, on the chairs...

'I DON'T GIVE A BLOODY DAMN ABOUT WHAT YOU ALL SAY! THIS IS OUR FIGHT AS MUCH AS IT IS YOURS! HERMIONE WAS NEVER A HELPLESS CHILD! GINNY LOST HER INNOCENCE WHEN VOLDEMORT POSSESSED HER! RON GREW UP AFTER THE BATTLE AT THE DEPARTMENT OF MYSTERIES! AND I - I - HOW DARE YOU SUGGEST THAT I HAVE DONE NOTHING TO THE OUTCOME OF THIS BLOODY FUCKING WAR?'

Piercing with his eyes each and every of the adults in the room, he drew breath sharply, and, in a calmer and more tired voice, he tried to make them understand that they could no longer protect them, that their childhoods were now no more than memories, nothing else. It was somewhat funny, if not ironic, how grown-ups would always look at their descendants as simple children, no matter what they had gone through, no matter what they had achieved in their lives. To a certain extent, it was understandable: a person who had changed another's nappies, who had taught them how to read, who had grounded them, had seen them at their lowest point of maturity. What couldn't be acceptable, however, was that desire and reluctance to let the past go, to treat younger persons as inferiors in wisdom. Just as every single person was a unique entity, each man and woman bore different scars of the past, whether they were faint lines or heavily marred and disfigured skin.

Slumping down on in an empty chair, his eyes unfocused, he tried to calm his own anger and frustration. 'You should see that this is going to happen whether you like it or not,' he said softly, 'and I can assure you, that risking my friends' lives is not something that I wish to do.'

'You should understand,' Hermione continued, her voice as calm and soft as Harry's had been, 'that if we find a way – and we will – to help Harry with this, we will be with him. While I can understand your feelings, it is not your place to decide what we do with our lives. You are our teachers, our mentors, our parents, our allies – but you are not Harry, Ginny, Ron or me.'

'What gives you the right to think you may control our will and our lives? What makes you believe that you know better, that you are more skilled than us? What power is it that you rely upon to control us? What makes you ultimately different at that than Voldemort?'

Silence followed that question and Harry had to applaud her slyness. In the most devious way, she had compared them to the one and sole person everyone in that room despised and abhorred. He was positive that none other besides her could possibly produce that statement in such a sad and victimised way. Admittedly, he thought that if the Slytherin House wasn't so loud about heritage and blood pride, Hermione would have been, if she had wanted to, a formidable example of what cunning and a sharp mind was. She was truly one of a kind.

It had been more Hermione's astute wording than Harry's outburst that had convince the adults to see into the matter instead of dismissing it outright. The atmosphere that followed her reasoning had been quite subdued, and by the time the meeting ended, Harry was positive that everyone was glad it was finally over so they could all go back to their respective homes and think about everything that had been said.

As always, Harry did not get to relax with his friends before lunch. Instead, he was asked by McGonagall to remain in her office to talk to her. Turning to face his friends' curious and inquisitive expressions, he told them that he would meet them later for lunch at the Great Hall.

To his surprise, Kingsley Shacklebolt stayed in his seat with a grim determination on his face. Bemused, Harry sat down again on a chair, somewhat fearing the motives for retaining him in the office

'Harry,' said McGonagall, 'due to this sudden – phenomenon – we have decided to train you intensively. We cannot afford to rely on luck and good chance. Kingsley and I have agreed to take you under our wing and prepare you as best as we can.'

Well, he certainly wasn't expecting that. He knew that, to some extent, the ring that had knocked him unconscious for ten days had stored copious amounts of knowledge in his brain, but that until he comprehended and assimilated all the new data in his mind, it was as good as useless bits of information. He had thought he would be spending endless hours studying books, and quite possibly talking to Dumbledore's portrait about the magic behind the aim, but he had never expected that either McGonagall or Kingsley would decide to spend their time helping him.

True, although strict and law-abiding, McGonagall had always cared for him; and Kingsley might not really be devoted to him, but he appreciated Harry and would probably try his best to see Voldemort defeated – again.

It suddenly hit him how fatigued they both looked, as if they'd gone to Hell and come back. The pools of mystery that usually filled Shacklebolt's eyes were nothing but a swirl of blurry and misty gloom. Strict and clever; Professor McGonagall's frame could be compared at the present moment to Mrs. Figg, his batty, cat-crazy-lover neighbour. It was as if their lives, their personalities and quirks had

been drained off them, as if they had spent some time in the company of Dementors.

‘You will have to understand that, from now on, ignoring my heart’s displeasure at putting you through this inferno, you will have little rest, and you may be increasingly tempted to give up, to let go...

‘I won’t let you, Potter.’

Harry was struck by the force and harshness in her voice. It once again came to his befuddled mind the first impression he had received from his Transfiguration teacher: she was not a woman to cross. In his opinion, most of the students underestimated his Head of House professor, believing her to be nothing else apart from a shadowy sort of lapdog of the mythical and ever omniscient Albus Dumbledore. They couldn’t have been more wrong.

There was no point in denying that Minerva McGonagall had always been tremendously close to the late Headmaster, and that sometimes she had not been the most vocal in the Order when she did not agree with its leader, believing his reasons to be for the best. For that reason, however clever, severe and a rigid instructor she was, she was usually classified as one of Dumbledore’s “henchwomen”. But not for the first time, Harry was able to see that his Head of House was a very intelligent individual, strict to her own beliefs and a force to be reckoned with. And for that, Harry could not respect her more.

He hadn’t noticed until her face softened and the harsh lines on her forehead disappeared, but the tone of her voice had made him tense up. It was oddly frightening that McGonagall could ever speak to him like that. He couldn’t be happier when she seemed to relax.

‘As two of the few members of the Order of the Phoenix,’ she continued talking, now in her usual no-nonsense tone, ‘Kingsley and I feel that we are the best prepared instructors to teach you what a

real fight is, and how to survive it,' she said honestly, her eyes piercing his, 'Not to undermine your achievements and outstanding courage, I must admit that good luck has been mostly on our side, especially these last few months,' she said briskly.

'This cannot continue. This new turn of events prove that no liberal amount of good fortune is going to help you win. If you are to win, you must take control of your own life – and we are here to help you.'

A spurge of mixed emotions ran within Harry's body: disbelief, gratitude, despair, eagerness, curiosity, determination, anxiety. It was funny to think he could feel all of that at once, given the fact that Ron the emotional teaspoon had clearly stated that if someone felt all of those emotions at once, he would definitely explode.

What Harry had thought to be another long and tiring meeting, was actually cut rather short as Professor McGonagall explained to him in his usual brisk manner that, starting the following day, he would begin to study Advanced Transfiguration and Animagi Art with her, magical and muggle defence with Kingsley Shacklebolt and, if they succeeded, Advanced Charms and Duelling with Flitwick.

When Harry asked about his friends, Professor McGonagall gave him a wry smile and told him that Miss Granger would against all odds find a way so they could be with him and that she was going to be taken under Slughorn's wing, seeing as she was indeed a very gifted student. While she did think that it would be advisable for his friends to improve their fighting skills if they wanted to survive, she expressed that her basic concern was him, Harry, the one who would definitely have to fight.

When she ended her speech and Kingsley nodded in approval, she told him that, while she was not the Secret-Keeper for the Dursleys, she knew perfectly well who it was, and since, theoretically, they were not in danger anymore, they should be freed from their hiding location at some point in the near future, if possible.

Harry shivered at how Slytherin McGonagall's face had become.

After a subdued lunch with his friends, in which he gloomily expressed that he had to go to see the Dursleys and that no, he didn't want any company, he went back to McGonagall's office at around three o'clock. Knocking on the door and opening after he heard her soft welcome, he entered the office, prepared to see his childhood terrors.

McGonagall nodded briefly at him from behind her desk, and then said in a loud, commanding voice, 'Eckey!'

Perplexed, Harry saw a tiny house-elf appear before him, bowing slightly to the Headmistress. 'Eckey is happy to being called by your Headship, Professor, miss. What is your professor-ship wanting Eckey's do?'

Perhaps it was again his own sheer dumb luck, but he was definitely not going to risk telling Hermione that, apparently, her model in life, mentor, favourite teacher and nearly worshipped Transfiguration genius owned a house-elf, something which she had been quite vocal against since she had learnt the miserable way in which wizards treated them, believing them to be inferiors in both magic and intelligence.

Remembering Dobby with a sad nostalgic smile on his face, Harry thought that wizards were stupid. A simple and lowly house-elf had saved the life of the great and wise Harry Potter – not because he had been ordered to, just because they had been friends. A sharp image of what Kreacher had been and the present Kreacher surfaced in his mind, and the difference could not be more impressive. Dumbledore

had been right, house-elves did have feelings as acute as any human; treated with respect, friendships may emerge from basically

every living being on earth.

Breaking him out of his reverie, McGonagall stood up and placed her wand to the little elf's heart. Shocked, Harry stepped forward, worried that McGonagall had gone insane and was actually going to curse the poor creature.

'I am going to do nothing of the sort, Mr Potter,' said Professor McGonagall, while her scary furious-dragon expression returned to her face, as if insulted that Harry had even thought she would do something of the sort to her own house-elf. Turning around and pointing her wand now at Eckey's heart, she said 'I, Minerva McGonagall, release you from your duty as Secret-Keeper to the Dursley Family. Do you, Eckey, House-Elf of the McGonagall House, accept it?'

'I accepts, your Headship,' said Eckey in his best English as he bowed. A soft blue light surrounded him for a fleeting instant and then it vanished.

'Do you Eckey, in the name of the Dursley Family, accept to release the Fidelius Charm?'

'They is accepting, your Transfigurationness,' said the minuscule elf, this time bowing reverentially in front of the professor, as another beam of blue light engulfed them.

Waves of shock spread through Harry as he scanned through his memory everything he had learnt about the Fidelius Charm. He knew it needed a subject – the ones that went into hiding, in this case the Dursleys; a caster, to perform it and to testify – McGonagall; and finally, a Secret-Keeper – a house-elf by the name of Eckey. Admittedly, he could not remember a single piece of information that restricted the use of the Fidelius Charm to humans only, probably due to the fact that it seemed unthinkable to trust an inferior being with such a task. Harry snorted mentally at men's own stupidity.

Indeed, it seemed much more reasonable to use a house-elf as a Secret-Keeper since they were bound magically to wizards and could not therefore reveal or do anything their masters forbade them to.

He couldn't help it, but a part of him would always imagine Wormtail's eager face when an anxious Lily and James Potter asked him to be their Secret-Keeper, putting their trust in him to keep their son alive; when a dishevelled Sirius performed the charm, thinking that his best friend and godson were going to be safe and sound...

He shook his head slightly, trying to erase those morbid thoughts. He concentrated on how the charm was lifted to keep his mind from wandering back to Wormtail's betrayal... an agreement on the three parts to cancel it... a soft blue light –

'Mr Potter, were you listening to me?'

'Er- what, sorry?' he asked dazedly.

Professor McGonagall's nostrils flared and Harry flinched unwittingly. 'As I was saying, would you like to go now to see your relatives or would you rather postpone it?' she asked.

'No,' Harry said, bracing himself, 'I'll go with Eckey now.'

Gathering all of his Gryffindor courage, he held the elf's hand and disappeared from the McGonagall's office with a soft 'pop', wondering where the Dursleys had been for a whole year. A second later, he opened his eyes and looked around him. It seemed as if he was in the middle of nowhere, trees and bushes all around him.

'Comes with Eckey Harry Potter sir,' said the elf, not releasing Harry from his firm grip, pulling him forward through the forest.

It was damp and derelict, like that type of woods that people avoided, with trees so high that no light penetrated their leaves; with no

animals living around. Everything was so cold, that Harry felt like an intruder, flinching every time he stepped on a branch. It was very creepy, although he could see no-one around, he felt as if there were dozens of eyes staring straight at the back of his head.

Five minutes later, Harry saw a head what looked like a very old and unwelcoming cottage. It reminded him of the hut he'd been to when the Dursleys had been on the run all over the country because of those Hogwarts letters seven years ago. It was an unwelcoming cottage, with its walls mossy and worn, the threshold almost completely destroyed. For the life of him, he couldn't imagine who had decided to put the Dursleys here. He couldn't deny the fact that between the Fidelius Charm and the remote and unlikely location, it seemed almost impossible that the Death Eaters would reach the Dursleys; but he felt that whoever had placed them there, he or she had done so with an extreme vindictive pleasure.

Climbing up the steps to the entrance door, he felt a strong wave of uneasiness through his body. He didn't know how the Dursleys would react to his presence, after a whole year of isolation, and, in all honesty, he didn't really want to know. While it may be true that, in the end, Dudley had been somewhat decent towards Harry, a full year with only Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia as company would most probably make Dudley forget any of the former respect he had shown Harry. Quite frankly, Harry couldn't blame him, living for such a long time with Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia could drive the sanest person completely mad.

Gingerly, Harry knocked on the door, noticing the apprehensive expression on Eckey's face. It seemed that Dursleys hadn't been very nice to the poor elf. Snorting inwardly, Harry thought he shouldn't be so surprised, since he had always been treated as a disgusting and smelly animal – and he was human.

In slow motion the door opened to reveal a shocked Dudley Dursley. Harry sighed in relief when he realised that Dudley wasn't going to

put into practice all of his boxing lessons and beat him to a pulp. Nodding slightly without uttering a single word, Dudley stepped away and allowed him to enter the cottage.

Harry's first impression was that he was back at Privet Drive. While not as perfectly muggle as the house in Surrey was, the cottage was still freakishly neat and snobbish. He was positive that no matter how the Dursleys had detested being with Eckey, they must have put the poor creature to do every single cleaning and cooking task while being extremely impolite to the house-elf. A muggle Malfoy, what fun.

Dudley had disappeared while Harry waited silently in the living room, but a pair of loud and hurried steps told him he wasn't going to remain blissfully alone for long.

'YOU!' Uncle Vernon bellowed from the nearest door, Aunt Petunia and Dudley behind him massive form.

And without a previous warning or notice –

WHAM.

Uncle Vernon boxed Harry square on the nose.

'Ouch! What the heck was that for?' Harry shouted, covering his bleeding face with his hand.

'YOU HAVE MADE ME LOSE MY JOB! YOU HAVE MADE DUDLEY LOSE A YEAR AT SCHOOL! YOU HAVE MADE PETUNIA UNHAPPY!' he bellowed at a stunned Harry, bits of flying spit wetting the floor. 'YOU HAVE FORCED US TO LIVE LIKE FREAKS – LIKE YOU!'

Remembering that he was allowed to do magic, Harry pulled out his wand, oblivious to the horrified gasps his relatives emitted and pointed it straight at his nose. 'Episkey!' A beam surged from his

wand and he felt a tingling warm sensation on his face. Touching his nose apprehensively, he sighed in

relief when it felt normal to him. He pocketed his wand and, with a flick of his hand, the rest of blood splattered all over his face and robes vanished. Looking back at the terrified Dursleys, he smiled broadly. 'Nice to see you, too. Say, would like to sit down for a few minutes so I can explain?'

Not waiting for an answer, he just walked up to the nearest armchair and flopped down on it. 'The man who killed my parents is dead, you can go back to Privet Drive,' said Harry nonchalantly.

Petunia slumped down on the couch unceremoniously while Vernon spluttered incoherently. Harry couldn't help it, but it was actually amusing to see his relatives looking at him in fear instead of in disgust.

'You killed him?' asked Dudley quietly.

Harry turned his head at his cousin and bore his eyes into his sickly bluish ones, trying to foretell what his reaction would be towards the truth. Would he be afraid? Wary? Awed? Shocked? Would he want Harry to join his gang of bad boys or would he shun him away as a murderous freak? Either way, Harry shouldn't care, since he'd never been anything else but a burden towards the Dursleys... but there would always be a part of him that would seek their approval, their affection, and Harry despised that part of himself.

'I did.'

'Oh,' said Dudley intelligently. 'So what happens to you now?'

Ignoring Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon, he decided to speak only to Dudley, the sole person who wasn't looking at him as if he were some sort of abomination. 'You can go back to your lives in Surrey

and you'll never see me again,' said Harry tiredly, a slight tone of anger and sadness in his voice.

'And what will happen to you?'

Harry squirmed in his seat. He wasn't really sure what to tell Dudley, and anyway they wouldn't believe it. 'I'm going on a new mission -'

Uncle Vernon snorted. 'You? Who would trust you with anything important?'

Harry's eyes hardened. He had had enough, their empty threats wouldn't affect him; not after everything he'd seen, everything he had done...

He stood up and walked away without uttering a single word, anger pulsing through his veins, his heart thundering against his chest. He slammed the door of the living room close and proceeded to exit the house.

'Hey, Harry – wait!'

Harry spun on his heels, Dudley had followed him outside. Although it couldn't have been more than a ten foot walk, his cousin was already panting heavily. 'Yes, Dudley?' he asked briskly.

Dudley flinched under Harry's piercing gaze, trying to but failing to tear his eyes away from his cousin's cold stare. 'Look, well – I know we haven't been friends or anything – but you saved my life – and, well, the thing is -'

'I'll send you a letter sometime,' said Harry, guessing what his cousin was trying to tell him.

Dudley smiled almost timidly and gave Harry his hand to shake. 'Well, good luck with whatever you are doing now.'

Harry nodded briefly. 'Good-bye, Dudley. If you don't hear from me again, then I've been killed.'

And with that, Harry Disapparated from that spot, leaving his cousin in a turmoil of feelings between wonder and horror. Merlin only knew if those two boys would ever see each other again.

-oOoOoOoOo-

'I DON'T BLOODY CARE, YOU NITWIT!' Ginny bellowed, pulling her hair. 'Stop being so bloody noble! It's ridiculous! How many times will we have to tell you that we are in this together!'

Harry stared at her without uttering a single word, half-angry, half-awed. Angry, because they couldn't see that he was probably not coming alive out of this new adventure, that fighting Voldemort was no easy and fun task, that it was his burden alone. Was it really so difficult to understand that he wanted them to live happily for a long time? Was it so complicated to see that he had no other option than to die fighting? If they could just comprehend it, he would part in peace, knowing that they wouldn't be outrageously murdered.

True, he couldn't completely concentrate on her angered words when he was so distracted by how alive her hair was, so much like the fire cackling in the chimney, softly burning the evanescent logs...

She fell on her knees in front of a gobsmacked Harry and grabbed his hands harshly. 'Why can't you see it? Do you know how selfish of you -'

'Selfish?' Harry snorted, freeing his hands from her grip. 'Selfish, you say? Oh well, excuse me if I want you to live!' he shouted, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

'Yes, it's completely selfish of you to be thinking like that. Do you

know how much sleep Ron has lost over this, thinking that you may not be lucky this time, in the past few weeks?’ she whispered with a strained voice, no anger present in it. ‘Did you know that Hermione has barely eaten, because she has secluded herself in the library, looking for ways to come with you? Can you even imagine how my family – my mother – is coping with Fred’s death, and now thinking they’ll lose you too? Can you even begin to imagine how I felt when I thought you dead, lying on the ground in front of Voldemort, at his mercy?’ she finished, her voice breaking.

Harry could only stare at her, at a loss at what to say. She looked so broken, so tired, so vulnerable... the last time she had looked that defeated to him was down in the Chamber of Secrets. She sat on the floor next to him and rested her back on the couch behind her, pushing her head backwards in silence, a lonely tear creeping down her cheek.

He felt his insides churn at his guilt. Yes, he wanted them alive, true, but then again they were suffering because of him. Sometimes he thought it would’ve been much better if he had been sorted into Slytherin and become completely friendless; that way none of his friends would have ever gone through so much pain – but he wouldn’t even have lived to do his third year at Hogwarts without them.

He grabbed one of her hands and they both remained quiet for a few minutes. ‘I am sorry. I just – I don’t want to lose you,’ Harry whispered.

Snapping his head in his direction, Ginny muttered quietly. ‘And why do you think we might want to lose you? You are worth all of it, Harry. We do love you.’

-oOoOoOoOo-

The following weeks were some of the most exhausting times Harry

had ever lived through. He barely had time for sleeping, let alone for enjoying the summer. As July came nearer to its end, the increasing pile of work and his physical training had already started taking a severe toll on him.

Apart from the heavy workload, it seemed as if he had suffered a heavy emotional blow. Things weren't going that great with his friends nor with the Weasley family, the air between them smelled of tension and fear, the conversations were strained and short, the smiles were fake and the laughter was mirthless and hollow. Truthfully, Harry could understand that it was not an easy situation, to have to relive the horrors of the past while healing the recent wounds, so he couldn't blame them. But there was a part of him that craved normality and simplicity, he only wanted to be able to laugh and smile like he had always done while he was at Hogwarts.

His training wasn't going that well. It was not due to any lack of interest or effort on his part, it was just that he wasn't accustomed to spending so many hours working his body, his defence skills and his reflexes. Kingsley was literally killing him slowly, making him wish for nothing else but to be knocked out unconscious and rest. The running, the stretching, the duels, the dodging... everything made Harry's muscles scream in protest, panting heavily, sweating profusely, his vision blurry.

Professor McGonagall wasn't going easy on him, either. He soon realised that Transfiguration was much more than changing needles into matches and vice versa. It was subtle, it was complicated, it was knowing about the properties, the shape of every substance or object one wanted to change. It was a bit like studying Muggle Chemistry, in order to foretell how two compounds will react towards each other when mixed, one must know previously exactly what they are. Admittedly, he had never put too much effort into the subject because he didn't find it that useful, it wasn't until he saw Dumbledore's duel against Voldemort in the Department of Mysteries that he realised how wrong he had been about it. Also, seeing his godfather's and

Wormtail's disguise as Animagi also came in quite handy.

To his own surprise, Harry discovered that Transfiguration had many things in common with Occlumency and fighting off the Imperius Curse. It was his own will that could push some unwanted presence out of his mind, it was his own will and power that could make one thing morph itself into another.

Of course, it was easier said than done. It had taken many hours of Harry's own frustration and McGonagall's patience to teach him what Transfiguration truly was, to help him uncover the truth behind the seemingly useless change between a tortoise and a teapot. McGonagall had decided to teach him how to become an Animagus, how to hone his skills. Seeing that Harry had quite an aptitude for wandless magic, between the Transfiguration mistress, Professor Flitwick and Dumbledore's portrait, they had drilled the basics into his mind. At first, Harry didn't have too much success on it, but with constant effort and work on his part, he began to improve, and step by step, he felt at ease only using his hand and his mind. It was an amazing sensation, to call his magic forth, to feel it tingling through his veins and muscles; he actually felt handicapped with his wand.

All in all, Harry felt as if he were a hundred years old. He felt tired, exhausted and alone. None of his friends were following the same training regime as Harry, they were doing their DA on their own. Harry barely saw them save for a few minutes at breakfast, lunch and before going to bed. And even then, they didn't have much to say to each other, either due to fatigue or frustration.

Things weren't going that great for Harry Potter.

-oOoOoOoOo-

With a mounting headache, Harry undressed and slipped into his bed covers one night at the end of July. He thought he was going to burst, he couldn't take it anymore. He rolled over and punched his pillow,

his eyes blazing. Why couldn't things work out for him? Why couldn't Hermione be more understanding? Wham. Why couldn't Ron stop being so thick-headed? Wham. Why couldn't Ginny control her sarcastic and hurtful tongue? Wham. Wham.

Stupid, useless arguments over the same topics, and they couldn't – wouldn't – even bother to think for just one moment that it wasn't his fault – that he just didn't know if they would be able to go with him... So what if he didn't spend his days researching? He barely slept, for Merlin's sake! Did that make him a horrible friend? It just wasn't fair – and then Kingsley and McGonagall – Ginny – urgh. Dammit!

Calming his breath, trying to focus on his Occlumency exercises to relax, Harry felt his heart slow in his chest, he concentrated on its soothing sound, so alive, so constant... Pum Pu-pum. Pum Pu-pum.

He would get through his nightmare.

Pum Pu-pum. Pum Pu-pum.

He would succeed. He would train harder, he would have more endurance.

Pum Pu-pum. Pum Pu-pum.

Things would turn alright between him and his friends.

Pum Pu-pum. Pum Pu-pum.

Now, if he could only get that book and access those blasted files maybe he would stand a chance.

Pum.

-oOoOoOoOo-

DISCLAIMER: 'How dare you suggest that someone owns me, Wormtail? Crucio!'

Wormtail is writhing in pain all over the floor, panting heavily, his screams filling the otherwise silent chamber. 'I am s-sorry, M-My Lord,' he says after a few minutes after the curse is lifted, 'I overheard Black and Potter talking in hushed v-voices about a certain JKR, saying that we were all figments of her imagination.'

Voldemort's snake-like nostrils flare in anger. 'And what is that about a certain Miss Vermouth?' he asked spitefully.

'They said she likes very much this world, and she writes about us too, creating another world. But that she doesn't own us,' he stammers. 'She seems to hate me and all rats, worships Black and finds Parseltongue very – er – "sexy", M-My Lord.'

Voldemort stares at Wormtail in distaste. The news of this JKR owning him angered him to no extent, but if it was true then there was nothing to do about it. 'Mm,' he said thoughtfully, petting Nagini, 'I shall let this Vermouth woman live, seeing that she clearly says that I am not hers. And I do find Parseltongue very attractive, too. In the mean time, Crucio!'

-oOoOoOoOo-

A/N: no, I am not insane. I just feel like adding some fun disclaimers, instead of the usual "I do not own Harry Potter, it's all JKR's".

About my dear old McG, she's always been one of my favourite characters, so I hope I didn't make her too much OC. She's powerful, she's clever, she's very loyal; but she's always been nothing but a sort of Dumbledore's extended arm to many of the students. Well, I respect her too much to make her look submissive now that Dumblydorr's gone. I suppose she's had her own hell to live through after his death and that is has somehow hardened her, the loss of her

mentor and friend by the hands of a colleague, even if it was arranged between them, is no laughing matter. In a way, under the protective tree of Dumbledore, she was like a child that looked up at her father. I'm not saying that she's childish, heavens no, but after his death she must have had many things to think over, and, although she is not a main character in the DH, there must have been some change in her personality. McG rules!

Okay, so yeah; nothing much happens in this chapter, but, although it's kinda void of useful stuff, it's dead necessary. So I didn't really liked it, but I can't always write my favourites scenes, can I? Anyway, please do tell me what you thought about it, alright?

Please review! And thank you so much for your support!

Cheers

Vermouth

Member of the Siriusan Order

REVISED: 16/04/2008 (Thank you, Hasufel!)

Chapter Five

Breathe, Just Breathe

... Magic is an impenetrable realm, full of mysteries and contradictions; where does it begin and where does it end? No-one knows, we can only use it; with no knowledge about the how's and the whys, we bend magic to our will, using only a few selected words in a foreign language and a few wand movements, we are able to produce outstanding effects.

But in truth, what does a stick and a few funny words have to do with our raw magical power? What is it that makes us capable of achieving shocking feats with a specific type of wood and a unique core? Why are wandless spells impossible to do while only the most powerful warlocks can do wandless magic?

Magic is an inherent power to those in the Land of the Living. Muggles do have it, only it's obsolete and therefore not functional, but in their very heart, an inch of magic exists.

But back to the matter at hand - Wandless Magic. As it is widely known, only the most powerful wizards and witches can perform it. Why is that so?

Magic is a wild spirit that flows through our bodies, and each of us contains a different amount of it. When we are young children, our bodies and minds are still too young, too immature to be able to have any control of our emotions and, therefore, our own magic. As the body and mind develop, magic shifts and can only be channeled with wands.

Magic is a force within us that can't be controlled, only tamed – and that is what wands are for. Wands translate our magic into the desired effect, they are like our vocal cords; without them, we cannot speak. To those still able to perform some wandless magic, they

must be extremely powerful to have a bit of their own power in its natural form. However, those warlocks can only achieve the simplest of magics; lighting candles and such; some of their vocal cords are dysfunctional, but they can still produce sounds, unintelligible, true, but they still can.

It is practically inconceivable to imagine the person who, without any vocal cords, might still be able to speak clearly; it's unthinkable that anyone could hold so much power that he wouldn't need his wand to perform spells.

It is a frightening and wonderful idea, to imagine such a person who can withhold such a great power. But, alas, given the fact that not even the mythical Merlin was supposed to be able to succeed in such a task, no-one truly believes anyone could surpass his unmatched skill.

However, I know better, I have foreseen it.

There will come a wizard, so powerful, so pure, that he will destroy our decaying world, build a new and better one from its ashes.

I know he will, and his name will be Harry James Potter.

Nostradamus: Principia Magica, Chapter Eleven: Of Wandlore and Him, 1397.

-oOoOoOoOo-

... Solitude, quiet and peace.

Harry felt as if he was trespassing some holy place of unearthly beauty, somewhere where he was not fit to be. He felt as if he were six years-old again and at school, where he was shunned for being Harry Potter, small, weedy and with those daft round glasses. But there was something about the place that beckoned him, that

welcomed him.

He didn't know where he was. For a fleeting instant he thought he had died, because he had never felt so warm, so content, so devoid of anything unpleasant. He felt nothing else but a deep, ensnaring tranquillity. He glanced around; it seemed as if he was in some kind of impossibly beautiful forest, but there was no-one around, not even animals, only a refreshing wind that seemed to caress his face softly, warmly. Night had already fallen, but he noticed that he could see everything perfectly; there was some kind of unearthly glow that surrounded the woods. Further away, on top of a hill, Harry could spot a huge white castle, shining fiercely against the dark skies, tempting him to trespass the entrance and make his own home there.

He didn't know where he was, he had never been there before, no matter how much the place looked like Hogwarts, and he didn't know whether he was welcome there or not. But he couldn't help wandering around, enjoying the quiet content that filled him. Everything was so warm, so appealing... Well, everything except for the endless black lake in front of him. It could possibly be the only thing he didn't like; in fact, he felt quite apprehensive to get near it; so deep, so still, so dead that it chilled him to the bone; so dark it seemed to be calling for his life...

Suddenly, the silence was broken and Harry spun around, wand at the ready; squinting his eyes, trying to spot what had broken his solitude by moving – no, slithering – around. But there was nothing, absolutely nothing – had he imagined it? He frantically he turned around, but still, he couldn't see any living and moving being apart from himself.

And then – out of nowhere – he spotted a huge body – but he had no time to do anything – a big pair of unforgiving bulbous eyes and he seized up, his heart constricted in his chest, and he fell on the ground, feeling as if life had left his body...

For a few minutes, he could sense nothing but his own mind, not his fingers, not the rest of his body; but as suddenly and unexpectedly as he had noticed something slithering about, he started feeling warm, too warm, in fact. Heat spread through the tips of his fingers and feet, into his legs and arms and the rest of his body. Alarmed, he tried to yelp, but no sound came out of his mouth, and he felt helpless, seeing that he was getting so hot he was going to –

Harry Potter burst into flames.

‘What the blazes has just happened to me?’ Harry asked after a while, flummoxed. He stood up and straightened his clothes, feeling the previous warmth leave his body, as a distant heart-lifting song echoed through his ears. Too concentrated on figuring out what the heck was going on, he didn’t notice any of the singing.

Just when he thought he could take no more surprises, the silence around him was yet again, as a loud roar filled the air, making Harry nearly jump out of his skin. And then –

He woke up.

-oOoOoOoOo-

‘Up you get, Harry,’ he heard someone – a woman – telling him gently, as he noticed a pair of thin but strong and determined arms heave him into a sitting position.

‘Whozzair?’ he asked groggily, his eyes refusing to work properly, his mouth dry and all of his muscles weird, as if they were foreign, unmoving and awkward objects attached to his body. He yawned, but he couldn’t cover his mouth with his hand no matter how hard he tried to lift his arm; although, in all honesty, he didn’t really care too much about manners at the moment.

Oh how did he wish the woman would stop talking and leave him

alone, let him sleep. It was worse than listening to Binns, or being at the end of Hermione's elven rights ranting, even worse than hearing a normal conversation between Lavender and Parvati... The woman kept talking to him, and he couldn't stop think about the mental image of a hundred buzzing bees surrounding a chunk of meat, pinching and prodding it constantly and tirelessly. Honestly, he didn't fancy himself a juicy steak. (A/N: mm, actually, I do. Yummy)

SLAP.

'Wo?' Harry asked intelligently, although a bit less dizzy; which was quite normal, in his opinion, he'd just been slapped after all. 'Whazat for?' he demanded, affronted.

'Snap out of it, Harry!' the woman yelled. 'You don't want to fall into a coma! Drink this, now!'

He felt the same pair of arms and hands grab his messy and untamed hair forcefully, pulling his head backwards in a swift move and opening his mouth wide, pouring some sort of revolting liquid into his mouth.

'Merlin, what was that for?' he shouted at the woman – McGonagall – as awareness took over him just as soon as he had swallowed that stomach-churning beverage. Urgh, even essence of Goyle had tasted better back in his second year as a Hogwarts student, when Ron, Hermione and himself had each drunk a vial of Polyjuice Potion.

'Potter' chided McGonagall, 'I told you before you agreed to take it that the Animagus Revealing Potion was a highly dangerous one, heavily controlled by the Ministry – you should be thanking Kingsley you are not forced to register - not only for those who take it but for those who brew it. I explained to you the effects and the risks! If you wake up and then fall asleep again you shall then never open your eyes again!'

‘Oh,’ said Harry.

‘Yes, oh,’ answered McGonagall unimpressed. ‘Now; tell me – what did you see?’

Harry remained quiet and pensive, for a few minutes. He knew that it was probably ticking his Transfiguration professor off further, but he needed to sort the images he had just lived through before telling her a seemingly drug-induced tale. What did all that mean, then? First the dead yet alive forest, the gleaming white castle, the eerie lake? Second – the sudden death, the flames, the unexpected rebirth, the deafening roar?

What creature on earth could possibly do all of those things at the same time? Unless Newt Scamander had lied to them all and such a creature did in fact exist, it wasn’t just possible! Unless, unless –

‘Professor!’ Harry shouted, making McGonagall clutch her chest as her face went pale in fright. ‘Er – sorry,’ he said sheepishly, noticing the elderly teacher’s reaction. ‘Anyway; do you remember, professor, when you helped me through the principles of the Animagus transformation, when you helped me decode the information stored in my brain?’ Waiting only a few seconds for McGonagall’s hesitant nod, he continued talking fast; ‘when you explained it to me, you told me that our Animagus forms show our inner true self, the true nature of our souls; my dad was Prongs, magnificent, arrogant and proud; Sirius was Padfoot, loyal and crazy; Pettigrew was a rat, sneaky and traitorous. So since we only have one soul, one person can only have one form, right?’ he asked quickly, wanting to let McGonagall know that what he was about to say did not come out of inexperience and lack of hours of being devoted to the Hogwarts’ library.

‘The thing is, professor that I – er – I think that might not be correct,’ he said nervously.

Professor McGonagall arched an eyebrow sceptically, piercing him with eyes that positively terrified Harry. 'And what do you mean by that, Mr Potter?' she asked briskly, her former warmth towards him vanishing; succeeding into making Harry extremely uneasy, as if she might attack him if he dared to defy one of the rules of the art she so well knew.

'Er, the thing is, professor, in my dream, the things I noticed, well, no animal magical or non-magical can be all those things at once... Er, well, you see first I, er, died, after I saw a pair of big yellowish bulbous eyes... and then I burst into flames and was alive again – and then I heard a deafening roar – professor? Professor!'

If Harry didn't any know better, he would've just bet all his money sitting at Gringotts that his ever so composed Transfiguration teacher had fainted out of shock.

'I am alright – I never – in all my years of study! – It's impossible, it can't be!' she sputtered, 'Do you know what this means?' she asked him wildly, any previous decorum forgotten. 'You've broken one of the most elemental rules known to wizards again! Why is it that rules never apply to you, Harry?' she cried, half-exasperated, half-awed.

He could only smile bitterly to that statement.

If only he had never been so special, he may have had a happy childhood and never been the central piece of the chessboard.

Too bad he sucked at that game.

-oOoOoOoOo-

'You know it meant loads to her, don't you?' Ginny told him quietly.

Harry nodded briefly, without looking at her, his eyes fixed on the lake

where he could spot the Giant Squid doing something to its appendages, gleaming in the moonlight.

He looked up at the skies, the stars and the moon, shining brightly over them and the grounds at Hogwarts. With a reminiscent sad smile, his thoughts wandered to those long gone years, when a wolf, a stag and a dog would be running blissfully oblivious to the world in a night like that one; not knowing what was in store for them, ignorant to the pain and suffering they would each have to live through; the ache, the loneliness, the feeling of the world falling apart as their lives shattered, crumbled before their own eyes. He sighed, acknowledging for the first time in his life how truly lucky he was. He may not

have had the happy childhood and normal teen years his father had had, but he knew he could actually hope for a future, something neither of his parents were now able to wish for.

‘I knew you didn’t want to have a big party, but I think if you hadn’t let mum fuss over you on your eighteenth birthday, she would’ve been much worse... thinking she had only one birthday at April Fool’s instead of two - ’ said Ginny, her voice breaking.

He took her hand in his. ‘I know,’ he whispered soothingly, trying to calm her down, rubbing his thumb along the lines of her palm, in the same comforting way she did to him. ‘I know.’

‘Before everything fell apart, we did have some good times, didn’t we?’ she asked, her voice an octave graver, her tone a barely audible sound, pain echoing through every syllable she uttered.

He glanced at her, boring his eyes into hers. She looked so sad, and yet so beautiful, with her flaming red hair silenced by the night, her pale complexion standing out, her freckles barely visible, her hazel eyes shining too brightly. He lifted his other hand and caressed her cheek, ‘yes, we did.’

She moved her legs a bit, her left knee touching Harry's, and she snorted lightly. He looked at her and at his inquiring gaze, she told him 'I was thinking about the summer after the battle at the – about the summer after my fourth year - '

'The summer I lost Sirius,' Harry whispered.

She nodded apologetically. 'Yes, but I wasn't smiling because of that. It's just – do you remember about Phlegm and how she drove my mum nuts?' she asked him.

Harry's lips twitched upwards. 'I reckon it wasn't the greatest idea to lock your mum up with Fleur in the broom closet, Gin.'

She smirked. 'Well, they needed to make up and stop driving me up the walls.'

He snickered, remembering Mrs. Weasley's maddened eyes at the sticky situation she'd been placed in. 'That they did. But I don't think your mum ticks that way. She had seven of you after all, and I seriously doubt it was the work of two women, honestly.'

She scrunched her nose in distaste. 'Ew, Harry, bad mental image! That's my mum and dad you are talking about! They have never done that,' she stated clearly, shaking her head wildly in a quite insane way, 'we were all immaculately conceived.'

Harry laughed with mirth. 'Sure, if you say so.'

'I do,' she nodded fervently. 'But I don't plan to have my children immaculately conceived. Actually, I plan on having them very dirtily conceived,' she added with a smirk.

Images assaulted Harry's brain, nearly making him jump out of his skin. His cheeks tinged pink at the heavily sweaty flashes that ran

amok through his mind, no matter how hard he tried to push them back where they belonged, where they were allowed. Damn Ginny and her innuendo! It would now take him some time to be able to look at her straight in the eyes without those dirty thoughts popping up.

‘Ginny,’ he whined.

She laughed quietly. ‘Oh, how do I love getting you all flushed and worked up Mr-Harry-James-Potter-Gryffindor’s-Quidditch-Champion-and-the-Dark-Lord-Slayer.’

Harry groaned. Vernon in stockings! Ron and Hermione kissing heavily! Voldemort smiling! McGonagall in her underwear!

‘Oh you are evil, pure evil,’ he complained childishly, his head in his hands, jerking his legs frantically.

‘You wouldn’t have me any other way,’ she humoured him, pulling his face upwards with her hand and planting a soft kiss on his lips.

‘I know,’ said Harry in defeat. Merlin, that girl was going to be the death of him. She would succeed in doing what Voldemort and all of his merry bunch of Death Eaters could not, he was positive. Although, admittedly, he couldn’t deny that he liked her methods of torture much better, thank you very much. But still, she was plain evil and cruel, and so Slytherin sometimes...

‘What are you smiling at?’ she asked him.

‘Nothing in particular,’ he told her, shaking his head lightly. ‘Just remembering that summer.’

‘Yeah... It was the start of our friendship, wasn’t it?’ she said absent-mindedly.

He nodded fervently. 'Yes it was. Before that summer I had never talked to you properly, too afraid you'd end up sticking your elbow in the butter dish again – OW! What was that for?' he complained, massaging his sore head after she'd slapped its back forcefully.

'For being a twit. Did you really need to remind me of that embarrassing stage of mine?' she asked him, feigning a winding anger, intending to strangle him.

He chuckled light-heartedly, trying to defend himself from her aggressive nature. 'Alright, alright, don't kill me please,' he begged her, laughing all the time as she ended on top of him, fighting with all she had to break her hands free from his firm grip.

'You know what to do, then,' she told him fiercely, straightening her bedraggled robes.

'Yes, yes, yes – death, mayhem and all the things orange, I know. ()' he answered her, snickering. He lifted himself from the grass into his previous sitting position and plucked the grass off his robes, smirking to himself.

'Do you remember that chess game?' she inquired suddenly.

He turned to look at her. 'Which one? The one we played when Fred and George had transfigured us all into chess pieces?'

She laughed richly at that one. 'Oh, I'd forgotten everything about that one! Merlin you looked so pwetty playing queen, such a nice dress it was!'

Harry's face flushed in shame at the thought. He remembered that day as if it had been yesterday. The whole Weasley family plus Phlegm, Harry and Hermione; minus Percy had been there. Harry and Ginny had been talking to the twins about their newest inventions and projects, Harry sincerely interested in the state of their

business, Ginny very interested in new pranks to play on Ron and the Slytherins as soon as she went back to school. Anyhow, both parties were deep in conversation, the twins had admitted grudgingly that at the moment they couldn't spend any time at their "Creativity Laboratory" because their hands were too full of work: the shop, the customers, the products they sold, the propaganda, the finances. They were actually thinking about hiring someone who was good at figures, so they could spend more time doing what they liked the most: exploding stuff in the lab. Trouble was, the only person they could think of who would be well suited for the post was Percy, and there was no way in Merlin's pants they would come to him after what he had done to the family.

Fred stood up and announced at that moment that he needed to channel his prankster instinct right then, and, after having seen the fierce game between Ron and Mr Weasley; with George's help, they

transfigured everyone into a piece of the set. Needless to say, Ron hadn't been too pleased when he found he was a white pawn, while his mother was the white king. But no-one hadn't been as embarrassed as Harry, with a veil covering his face and a long tight dress around him, with his privates getting such a healthy breeze.

'Excuse me if I am wrong, but you weren't actually that happy when they made you knight, your buttocks sticking out, were you?' Harry smirked at her, remembering how flushed Ginny had been when she'd been forced to be in that awkward position. However, he had to erase that image from his mind a second later, and he chided himself. Why-oh-why did that long buried image of laughter at an innocent joy turn into something completely perverted?

'No, I wasn't,' she admitted ruefully. 'But that wasn't the one I had in mind. I was referring to that chess game we had when we were all high on sugar, thanks to me and my brilliant ideas to cheer your long faces up.'

Harry laughed at the memory of that game. 'I don't think I'd ever seen Crookshanks as frightened as that day!' he said, clutching his stomach as he laid his back on the ground again, his muscles aching.

She guffawed heartily. 'Good times those, weren't they? Quite unlike what they turned into...'

He sobered up immediately and sat again. 'I Know. Later everything just shattered. Dumbledore – the Horcruxes – everything...' he uttered sadly.

'Our relationship,' he heard her whisper to her knees. Ginny then raised her head and looked at him straight in the eye, as if afraid to say what she wanted to tell him. 'Harry?'

'Yes?' he asked her encouragingly.

'Where are we?'

Proof of how much Harry had actually matured when it came to understanding girls thanks to the many hours he had spent with Ginny (Hermione was a girl, yes, but she was just too weird), he knew exactly what she was talking about, thank you very much. A few years ago, he would've just stared at her, questioning her sanity, and would have told her blankly "Hogwarts, the grounds". But that night by the lake, Harry realised he knew better than that.

'I don't know,' he answered truthfully, not looking at her but at the ground between his legs, his fingers playing with the soft grass and the tiny flowers around. 'A part of me wishes to keep you safe and sound here; but the other wants nothing else but to have you with me all the time, and I know that no matter how much I dislike endangering your life, you'll get to come with me.'

She kissed him softly and smiled on his lips. 'That's how it should be,

Harry,' she told him softly. 'So you could say we are back together, not just snogging left, right and centre?'

He smiled sadly at her. 'Were we ever truthfully apart? Did you ever want to be with someone else, hug someone else, kiss someone else when the war broke out in the open, while I was gone hunting down Voldemort's bits? I know I didn't, not for one second – you were always there,' he told her honestly, and with such a force in his voice her heart broke and she tackled him to the ground, kissing him fiercely, feverishly, ferociously, possessively.

His hands travelled to her waist, and he hoisted her until she was practically lying on top of him, their lips never breaking apart, the sole thought occupying his mind was just how right she felt, with her weight on his, the feeling of her warm and soft body melded against his, her hands in his hair and neck.

It was intense, it was hot, it was exciting, and it sent tingles through Harry's spine, wanting more, wanting to drown in her...

She pulled away and smirked evilly at him.

He shivered.

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The Boy-Who-Hides

By Rita Skeeter

Beloved readers, haven't you all been wondering what has become of Gryffindor's Golden Boy, Harry Potter? Haven't you society involved-people questioned what has happened to our resident hero after he single-handedly defeated the darkest wizard of all times, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, whom he usually calls ever so dismissively by his first name? Haven't all you darling girls whined,

not knowing what's with that charming man claimed by Witch Weekly to be the Most Eligible Bachelor in Britain?

I know, I know, many of you have racked your brains trying to decipher where the elusive Mr Potter is. Is he, as Ms Hannah Abbott thinks he is, resting and sunbathing in the Bahamas? Is he, as Mr Zacharias Smith believes him to be, in Cambodia, bringing up the secret child of his previous girlfriend, Cho Chang? I, Rita Skeeter, can exclusively reveal that neither of them is in the right, for he has not left Hogwarts since the beginning of the summer days.

The question is why, of course, why has Harry Potter been secluded within the walls of the castle that has been the home of this valiant, handsome, courageous and orphaned boy? The exact reason of it, I am afraid I haven't found out yet – but I fully intend to do so in the near future. However, it is interesting and a bit disturbing that he has made a legal appointment to sue anyone who dares to write his biography. What secrets does Harry Potter, the most famous boy ever, have to hide so blatantly? Was it some secret love affair of his? The most intriguing mission Albus Dumbledore apparently planted on his shoulders before he died? His disappearance from the world since last summer? The true nature of the most mysterious prophecy? For we all know there was one, since he indirectly mentioned it in the final confrontation with He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named: “I don't want anyone else to try to help. It's got to be like this. It's got to be me” he told the crowds first; “There are no more Horcruxes. It's just you and me. Neither can live while the other survives, and one of us is about to leave for good...” That, I believe, dear readers, is one of the sentences of the well-hidden prophecy that concerned those two titans, but Mr Potter isn't available for confirmation. Not to forget, we are positive Mr Potter survived the Killing Curse yet again on that fateful night, his death feign and the words exchanged with Him are enough evidence to hold that statement true... Which leads me to wonder whether there is something that can resist Mr Potter... And what on Merlin's name are Horcruxes? We do not know, for it is a Ministry-banned

subject...

Talk of the devil, Mr Potter has been seen meeting Ministry officials regularly, and, especially, he has been meeting our own Minister for Magic, Kingsley Shacklebolt. When inquired about the nature of these little rendezvous, the Minister disclosed nothing apart from the fact that it was top classified information and that none apart from Harry Potter, a few ministry officials, other needed people and himself knew about. Of course, that kind of statement would lead anyone into believing a revolution is going to break out. What are those pompous, arrogant Ministry dogs and Mr Potter planning? What can be so secret that gives the Minister constant headaches and nightmares so vivid his teddy bear Hendrick

can't help him anymore? What has driven Harry Potter into building a solid body instead of continuing having his lanky and tall self?

Although we may not know yet the why for this sudden change in Mr Potter, I can assure you witches (and wizards) that Mr Potter has been fabled as Most Eligible Bachelor in Britain with a good, solid reason. With a fortune large enough to buy a whole continent, a power rumoured to rival those of You-Know-Who and Albus Dumbledore at their strongest, a pair of beautiful and penetrating evergreen eyes and a body many of us girls can only imagine and most men can only dream of having, don't we all wonder who will be the fortunate witch to capture his heart?

Ms Lovegood, daughter of the crazed editor of the Quibbler and a close friend of Harry Potter had a few words to say about the matter. 'Harry has been infested with Nargles since he left school last year. But I think he finally got rid of it with the juices of Gibly-Grublebellies.' I am still trying to decipher what she meant by that.

Ms Romilda Vane's answer, a pretty and vivacious soon-to-be sixth-year student at Hogwarts, was much clearer. 'He used to date

that Weasley girl, Griselda, I think that was her name. But he dumped her two weeks later or so. Merlin, let's be honest, would Harry Potter seriously date someone who has nothing else but a bit of talent at the Quidditch pitch? For the love of Agrippa, no! She is just an ambitious and plain girl who wants to brag about dating Harry Potter!' Well, if that is indeed true, we readers are very happy indeed his relationship with that creep ended. Which is all well, for his heart is open to the much more deserving witches in England.

Mr Longbottom, son of the tortured Aurors Frank and Alice Longbottom and another of Harry Potter's close friends, when visited at his family's ancestral manor, had unfortunately nothing but few and rude words to say: 'you leave Harry alone, even if he wishes to date Professor McGonagall, you will leave him alone!' Well, at least Mr Potter seems to have very devoted friends.

Still, as it has become apparent that Mr Potter has no little witch holding his heart – go chase him, girls! Fight to be the one that claims she's the girl who keeps him warm at night!

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'Faster, Harry! Harder, Harry!'

'I am trying!' he whined, panting heavily, 'damn, I just can't get my body to work!'

He dodged again a pair of curses that came in his way and then rolled over and stood up, wiping the sweat off his face with his forearm, panting heavily. A stray beam of purple light came rushing towards him out of nowhere and, before it hit him square on the chest, he yelled 'Destructo!'

He heard a deafening explosion before him, but he couldn't see it as he was fighting in semi-darkness, and he fell to the ground, his chest hurting terribly.

‘STOP!’ Kingsley’s voice commanded and all of the attacks on Harry halted and the lights went on. He closed his eyes quickly and shielded his face with a sweaty arm, as the sudden amount of brightness hurt his green orbs. He lay on the ground, unmoving, waiting for his heart to resume a normal pace while blood pounded ferociously on his ears, his t-shirt and sweatpants sticking tightly and uncomfortably to his exhausted body, spread over the cold marble stone.

‘You are getting better, although there’s still ample room for improvement,’ Kingsley’s rich baritone voice broke the silence, as Harry lifted the burning arm off his face and took the offered hand

that hoisted him to his feet. ‘Incredible reflexes, outstanding speed. But I think you can give much more yet.’

Harry nodded in acknowledgement and put his hands on his knees, trying to stretch his sore muscles. ‘Yes, sir. How many dummies did you activate this time?’

The Minister grinned wolfishly. ‘Twenty, out of which you’ve left only one standing. The rest of them have either been stunned, incarcerated, burned, frozen, destroyed from within, cut open or beheaded. Oh, and do remember to use non-verbal spells, will you? All the Occlumency we’ve been practising together should help you with that.’ Harry winced apprehensively at the state of the dummies that had been so thoroughly slaughtered, he truly didn’t want to use such lethal force, but he knew the time when he could disarm his opponent and get away with it was long gone. The time where he was a pawn ascended to bishop in the battle between Dumbledore and Voldemort was over, he was his own man and he would have to fight and play dirty, although he refused to lower himself to the Death Eaters’ level.

‘Your spell knowledge is increasing day by day, and your natural

fighting skills are astonishing, but I know you can do so much more. It's only you who needs to know that, too. Ready for another go?'

Harry inhaled sharply and nodded determinedly. Preparing his stance, he lowered his wand into a defensive-offensive position and he clenched his jaw in concentration as the lights flickered out. He stretched his free hand and then drew it back into a fist; constant tingles ringing through his body, his muscles contracted in high alert, all of his senses sharpened.

All of a sudden, he sensed a presence behind him, and before anything could hit him, he spun around. 'Incendio!' and felt waves of heat near his body, making him jump a few feet away. 'Escindo! Sectumsempra! Stupefy! Lamanus!'

Four o'clock, a jet of bluish light nearly hit him and he dodged at light speed, feeling his hair ruffle. Eleven o'clock: green light. Uh-oh... Move Harry! He rolled on his stomach, faster than anyone could ever be and stood up on his feet, right as rain, jumping slightly in tension. Six o'clock, twelve o'clock, one brownish and one pinkish jets spiralled towards his abdomen and head. 'Reducto! Hielo! One blasted dummy, another one frozen. Good, he said to himself.

Ten, eleven, twelve, one and two o'clock: five twin greyish beams shot directly at his forehead. Easy, he smirked as he bent backwards to avoid them. 'Aquopolis!'

'Oh shit!' he cursed. He was bloody surrounded. His clock was full, packed with the twelve hours and some half-hours. He dodged, rolled, but he was hit several times. He was bleeding, he was tired. 'Destructo! Hielo!' There were still too many! What was Kingsley thinking? What was he doing, was he on crack or something? 'Reducto! Atlas Fractum!' He rolled and jumped. 'Fuck! What the heck just happened? Kingsley! They are out of control!' Harry roared, as he escaped yet another beam of green light and responded with another Severing Charm. 'Incendio!' he thought, and raced through

the room, feeling his vision blurry; if this fight didn't stop soon, he'd end up passing out. 'Hydra!'

Shit, the dummies were like multiplying themselves. With each one he got down, two more came to attack him. 'Arco! Reducto! Reducto! Sectumsempra!' Dodge, bend, jump duck, turn ninety degrees to the left, jump to the right, do a one-eighty. 'Incendio!'

Bugger, he'd been hit straight on his cheek and neck with a Severing Charm and he was bleeding from his wounds profusely. 'Destructo! Reducto!'

His neck was killing him and his legs were ready to give into his weight. He just hoped Kingsley would stop playing these games and let him rest, he'd been going at it for the last twelve hours, he just needed to rest for a while, just a few hours... six straight hours in his bed would be a dream come true...

Out of nowhere, three jets of red light hit him on three different places and he fell to the ground, his whole body twitching as an excruciating pain swept all over him, ensnaring his mind. His eyes rolled backwards – he couldn't think anymore – all of his nerves on fire, hot knives stabbing him, a thousand needles piercing through his skin... but he didn't scream, not with the Cruciatus Curse on him.

Wait a second – the Cruciatus Curse?

But that was impossible! Kingsley had told him he had charmed the dummies to throw jets of green and red light to fake the real Unforgivables! But this was the real thing! Merlin, what was the Minister playing at? Slowly, forcing himself to admit he was in pain but that it shouldn't cloud his thinking, he put all his effort into raising his two wandless hands, the curse still active on him.

'Inferno!'

A rush of heat – screaming – as the lights were turned on as a sputtering Kingsley entered and threw himself by his side, quickly healing the wounds as best as he could. ‘Merlin Harry, I’m sorry! I don’t know what happened! And what did you just do? I was seeing it from the outside, screaming for the dummies to stop – but nothing happened – I am sorry! Episkey! Episkey! Cicatrix! I swear I charmed them to fake the Unforgivables, I am sorry! But what the heck did you just do?’

‘Dunno Kinsy,’ said Harry groggily, ‘liftams – seh ‘Infno!’ n’ tha’s all!’

‘Bloody hell, I am taking you to Madam Pomfrey right now. Oh she’s just going to kill me I know. But Harry, did you just utter the Inferno Curse wandlessly, or were my eyes deceiving me?’ Shacklebolt pressed on, suddenly frightened, as he lifted Harry into a conjured stretcher and produced several blankets to keep him from catching a cold.

‘Yah, I guess so. Whassamatta?’ he asked.

Kingsley went pale and started trembling from head to toes, his whole body rigid and his eyes staring at Harry wildly, so insanely that even Harry at his present broken state was severely wary of him. It was chilling, it was eerie. ‘Kinsy?’ Harry tried feebly.

‘But that’s impossible! Unthinkable! Unfathomable!’

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‘Mate, you look terrible. You looked as if death had warmed over,’ Ron told him as soon as he entered the Gryffindor common room.

Harry rolled his eyes and slumped on the couch. ‘Yeah, try having Kingsley cursing your soft bits off and then McGonagall after your blood, see how well it suits you,’ said Harry, his voice dripping sarcasm.

Ron winced a bit. 'Sorry mate. That sounds terrible... and I thought I was hard-done-by with all these books, trying to understand Hermione...' he said, with an attempt at humour, smiling at Harry tentatively from his position on the floor.

Harry smiled weakly. 'Sorry mate, I was a bit harsh on you. So, what are you reading? Where's everybody?' he asked, bending forwards, curiosity getting the better of him even in his exhausted state, wanting to know what Ron had been reading before he had come into the room.

Ron lifted several books and passed them to Harry. Defensive Magic, Transfiguration Today, War Strategy...

'Phew, you've been busy,' said Harry.

'You bet,' answered Ron tiredly, putting several piles of notes on a heavier stack in front of him. 'I doubt Percy had ever worked as hard as we are working right now. Bloody hell, OWLs were holidays compared to this!'

Harry laughed weakly. Truthfully, he didn't think he had ever been that tired. He just didn't have any spare energy for anything anymore, he only wanted to drown in his blankets and pillows, and nothing else, no dreams, no ambitions, no snogging Ginny, only simple and plain rest. 'Any progress on the research front?' Harry asked, scratching his eyebrow.

Ron shrugged. 'Dunno. Hermione was pretty excited this morning. So it's either she's found a way for real this time or it's a dead end again. What about you?'

Harry sighed. 'I owe Kreacher, big time -'

'He's got no problems to go with you like us, does he?'

He shook his head. 'No he hasn't, elf magic binds him to me. I told him about this new situation and then asked him what he wanted to do about it, whether he wanted to stay at Grimmauld Place or be with me. Well, he was quite vocal about it, so I guess I'll take him with me. So, anyway, yeah, I owe him. He has set the wards to recognise me as the rightful owner of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black, unless of course – he – is alive, in which case - '

BOOM.

Hermione Granger had just nearly blown off the portrait hole, stampeded into the common room and grabbed Harry's neck – nearly strangling him, but who cared? – and tackled him to the ground, where she gripped Ron's neck too and started crying outrageously, continuously banging their heads together.

'I did it – I found it...' she sobbed.

'Hermione – air...' Ron choked.

'Oh! I'm sorry,' she said, releasing them, burying her face into her hands, not noticing the massages they were each giving to their very sore necks and their relieved faces; she didn't notice Ginny's amused grin from the entrance either, she just continued crying and sobbing into her hands until Ron threw an arm around her shoulders and Harry lifted her chin with one of his fingers.

'What do you mean, you "found" it?' asked Harry, his eyes narrowed, wondering whether his line of thought was correct and whether it meant what he believed it did.

'I did it! I know how to go with you!' said Hermione, between sobs.

'You – you did?' cried Ron, elated.

Hermione nodded curtly. 'I was so desperate to get a new idea, something that would work. Each and every one of my previous ideas had been wrong and unsuccessful, so I tried to use things that I already knew, that I'd already used – but modified,' she explained.

'So what was it?' Ron asked keenly.

Hermione sighed. 'The Dark Mark.'

Harry felt his eyes pop at that. 'No – absolutely not. There's no way I'm using such a – vile – thing. I'm not risking your lives that way! And I'm not making a Horcrux, either!' he yelled at her.

Hermione shook her head. 'It was my inspiration, but it's the Dark Mark as it should have been, not the twisted thing Voldemort created. I knew you would refuse branding us with something like that, something that would kill all of us should you die, so I created what the Mark should have been.

'This mark is an act of love, trust and loyalty to you, it's pure; something Voldemort could never have used for his own purposes. It will link us to your whole and untarnished soul united to your body, but once your soul leaves your body, the link will be severed. Should you create a Horcrux, your soul will be damaged and so would ours – and I seriously don't want to risk it. So, in theory, you should be able to summon us whenever and wherever you wish, although it will probably take some time for it to adjust, so I don't think you'll be able to summon us as soon as you get there. It's very important you understand this: we are not linked to your soul, your life force, we are linked to the union between your body and soul; if you die, we don't; if we die, you don't.'

Harry felt touched, really touched. To know what she, what they had all done, and just for him, for Harry; it was deeply moving. Of course, he couldn't help feeling antsy about the whole new situation. He sighed. 'So I guess I should be giving you what I got you from

London a few days ago.'

'You went to London?' Ginny asked, flummoxed.

Harry nodded sheepishly. 'Kingsley made me. Now that you've found the solution to the problem, he should be taking you soon, too.'

'What for?' Hermione inquired curiously.

He smiled enigmatically, 'You'll see.' Harry then turned his head to the staircase and lifted his right arm, 'Accio!' and with a flick of his hand, a trunk came tumbling down the rickety staircase that led to the boys' dormitories.

'Harry – did you just - ?' Hermione hissed, while the other two just looked at Harry, their eyes open in shock and awe.

'I did, but don't ask anything else. I just don't know, I have to talk to Dumbledore.'

Calming Hermione down and bringing the two Weasleys back to life after that impossible little display of magic was worse than Harry had expected. They would probably have been more active if a trolley had run over them, honestly. Hermione was concentrated on whatever impossibly difficult theories her brilliant brain could come up with; Ron kept gaping at him like a fish and Ginny had a feral, predatory look to her that sent shivers down his spine.

'Okay, could you please concentrate on this bloody trunk for a second?' Harry asked, slightly exasperated and, thankfully, his friends' eyes shifted to the object instead of keeping fixed on their previous spot, him. Harry stood up and put his hand on the lock of the trunk and it opened up for him. 'Don't touch it yet, you haven't been keyed in,' he warned them. 'I'll place a drop of my blood on one of your hands, and then you must put your palm right over the centre of the lock, I'll say something and that should allow you to enter the

trunk,' he finished.

The three flabbergasted friends did as they were told only, of course, they understood nothing of what Harry said before their hands glowed blue because he muttered his words in Parselmouth, snake language. Extra precautions, constant vigilance and all that. Someone could say Harry was the reincarnation of Alastor "Mad-Eye" Moody, bar the scars, naturally. Nothing could have prepared Ron, Ginny and Hermione for what awaited them inside of the trunk, it was an exact copy of Potter Manor, with its grand corridors and ceilings, the magnificent library that had Hermione acting like a little girl, the massive bedrooms, the duelling room, the Potions laboratory, the infirmary... It had absolutely

everything save for the Quidditch pitch and the swimming pool they had had a glimpse of at the real manor.

'Come to my room, and don't make too much noise over there – Kreacher's cot is just next door, and I think he's resting,' Harry whispered to an ecstatic Ron in the kitchen.

They entered the master bedroom and Ginny glanced at the massive bed so hungrily that even Ron, who was usually oblivious to everything that happened around him, noticed her reaction and elbowed her quite harshly, earning a death glare from her. They sat down on the bed while Harry went to open one of the wardrobes and extracted from it what seemed like half of Madam Malkin's.

'Right,' he said, dropping all of the clothes and other items on the mattress. 'These black robes are all for you. They aren't your normal robes, mind you, they are battle robes. I bought ten for each of you, but maybe we'll have to buy some more eventually. Once you put them on, they'll adjust to your size, so don't worry about them not fitting you. Same goes for the cloaks, boots, etcetera,' he said, barely taking any time to breathe.

Ginny's eyes were bulging out as she held a robe close to her, inspecting it. 'But Harry, these must have cost you a fortune! This is dragon hide! It's too much -'

He waved his hand dismissively. 'I don't care. You are all going to risk your lives for me, it's the least I can do. So, moving on,' he said, succeeding in killing any of the arguments he knew would break out if he remained quiet, 'the next item I thought you'd need is a wand-holster,' he told him, picking up a brownish leather tube and he strapped it around his right forearm. As soon as he placed his wand inside of it, they gasped – the wand-holster had vanished. He jerked his arm and his wand was shot directly at his hand and the holster reappeared. 'Handy, isn't it?' he smirked at them.

Hermione, Ron and Ginny could only nod, speechless. Oh, how he was going to shock them all with the next item. 'So, now, I don't want you, Hermione, to start complaining about the next gift, you are going to be taught how to do this properly. If Death Eaters set up Anti-Apparition and Anti-Portkey wards, the sky might be our only alternative to escape,' he chided her gently, brandishing a shiny new broom in front of her.

Both Ron and Ginny nearly fainted at the sight of the new broom. 'Harry is that – a – a Th-Thunderflame?' asked Ron in vivid disbelief.

'Yes it is,' he answered. 'I got each of you one, so you'd better teach her how to fly, Ron. It could very well save her life one day,' he told him softly, wanting him to understand that this was not a gift to enjoy, this was a gift to save their own skin.

Ron nodded, suddenly serious and sober. 'Okay, but can we fly tonight?' he whined.

Harry laughed with mirth. 'Sure. Anyway, Kingsley will take you to the Ministry and get some special robes for you -'

‘More robes?’ Ron asked.

‘Oh, these are unlike anything you’ve ever seen,’ he informed them, propping his weight on his elbows, lifting his legs to have spread them over the wide mattress. ‘They are Unspeakable robes.’

‘What?’ cried Hermione, astonished.

He grinned at her. ‘Unspeakable robes. You’ll just have to wait and see.’

‘So, when are we going to London?’ Ginny inquired as she draped an arm over Harry’s abdomen and rested her head in the crook of his neck, blatantly ignoring her brother’s disapproving look.

‘What for? I already alerted Ragnok!’ asked Harry, flummoxed.

‘Tsk, tsks,’ Ginny tutted. ‘Harry, if you are now going to brand us with your Macho Man Mark, we must have a tattoo, musn’t we, Hermione?’ she asked her friend, who simply nodded.

Ron whistled. ‘Mum’s going to kill us, you know?’

‘Nah, don’t think so. I think she’ll end up getting one herself, too. Anyway, Ron, now you can fulfil your dream and get a Pygmy Puff tattoo,’ she told her brother seriously.

‘Ha-bloody-ha,’ Ron scowled while the other three howled with laughter. ‘But seriously mate, it’s your mark, you get to choose it. What do you want?’

Harry furrowed his eyebrows, deep in thought. Ron was right. If this was going to be a permanent thing, he had better choose something that represented him and not anyone else. His scar? No, bad idea. He hated what the scar symbolised, the fame, the fight against Voldemort, the death of his parents... and anyway, it was too much of

a give-away. Snitches, broomsticks? No, too general. So what could it be, then? What was his and only his? Suddenly, something clicked in his brain.

‘A phoenix, a basilisk and a lion, all together.’

-oOoOoOoOo-

‘How are you Harry? How are you truly?’

Harry slumped down on a chair in front of Dumbledore’s portrait, letting his exhaustion show for the first time. ‘All in, professor.’

Dumbledore smiled sympathetically at him, the twinkling from his eyes all gone. ‘I am truly sorry you have to go through this, Harry.’

He waved his hand dismissively. Not your fault. This is just – so overwhelming I can barely keep track of anything nowadays...’

‘I know. In any other circumstance I am sure you would’ve been astonished at your own achievement, but in the light of what you know you will have to face, everything looks dwindled and insignificant, does it not?’ he asked shrewdly.

Harry nodded. ‘It does. Everyone is making such a fuss about my wandless spell, the triple Animagi forms... but it just means nothing to me...’

‘Understandable, Harry. But that does not mean you should hold your feats worthless, Harry, for they are truly wonderful and unexpected. I believe you have shocked dear Minerva so much she does not know anymore what to believe true and what to believe a lie,’ said Dumbledore, a hint of his old maddening twinkle back in his eyes.

Harry chuckled lightly. ‘I know. But it just doesn’t make sense. I mean, Animagus forms represent your soul, so why do I have three, and

what were all those things in my dream?’

Professor Dumbledore frowned in his portrait. ‘I can only give you my guesses, Harry. Although I do believe them correct and accurate, that’s all they are – guesses; forgive my lack of modesty, but they are the ideas of a very old mind brought with deep knowledge and quite a sum of brainpower,’ he told him gently. ‘I believe your true form would be the lion, which would obviously represent your most

known trait: your outstanding courage. As for the phoenix and the basilisk, I believe those forms to have been recently acquired: you are the symbol of death and birth, Harry.’

‘Merlin, that sound so comforting,’ said Harry sarcastically.

Dumbledore chuckled. ‘It is quite overwhelming that’s true. Alas, how I do wish Minerva would keep my old habit, Lemon Drops. They would most certainly help you right now, dear boy.’

‘Concerning your dream; the forest, the lake, the castle – that was you. The endless forest represented your eternal soul and its infinity; the lake was the mirror of your angst, your fears, your anger; but the castle, oh how I do wish I could see that – the castle, Harry, that’s your mind. I can say in all honesty I am very proud indeed your mind took the form of Hogwarts castle.’

‘That was my mind?’ Harry asked, deadpanned.

‘Indeed. As soon as you begin to get a firm grasp on Occlumency, I am positive it will appear to you. But enough of lessons, Harry. I want you to relax, Harry. You have not rested properly in a very long time, and exhaustion is apparent on you.’

‘I just don’t know, Headmaster, I just can’t stop. All I do is work and study. I’m in a constant bad mood, I’m on edge all the time. I just want out...’ he whispered, lowering his head to rest on his hands. ‘I

know the equinox is coming close, and only tomorrow students will be arriving at Hogwarts, and Professor McGonagall will be secluded working in her office most of the time, so this may well be the last time we see each other, professor,' said Harry sadly, his voice breaking.

'No, my brave, dear boy. I believe you will succeed and we will see each other very soon, indeed.'

-oOoOoOoOo-

'Good morning Harry, Ron, Ginny, Hermione. Ready to take Teddy out today?'

'Yes Mrs Tonks,' said Harry, taking the infant from her arms, marvelling at how much Teddy had grown in the short time they had been apart, grinning at the child's attempt to make him smile by changing the colours of his hair faster than you could say "Quidditch".

After some pleasantries were exchanged and Teddy was properly dressed, they bid their good-byes to Mrs Tonks and told her they would return her grandson at seven in the evening. With that, they Apparated in front of Potter Manor and were greeted immediately by a pair of overjoyed house-elves, Tweedle-Dee and Tweedle-Dum.

They were led into the massive sitting room where several blue couches sat around an enormous fireplace, flanked at each side by armours, giving the room an air of protectiveness and fierceness. Harry sat next to Hermione and plopped Teddy on his lap, letting the kid play with his hair and glasses, smiling at the blatant display of innocence and trust Teddy showed him. He sighed sadly, wondering whether this would be the last time he'd be with the child or whether he would live many more years and get to know him. Would his parents' counterparts be alive, somewhere? In which case, would they accept the kid and take it as their own, accepting Harry's

explanation? He knew there was a big chance he would never get to know his godson, and so he had left him a letter to open when he was older and explained what he would have to face to a disbelieving and teary-eyed Mr. Tonks. He could only hope his wish was granted and he would get to see the child grow up.

Harry didn't know, but whatever happened, he would consider Teddy as his own blood and flesh.

Morning flew by in a gale of laughter and smiles, as Harry took Teddy for his first ride ever on a broomstick. He had promised Mrs Tonks he would take the infant with him and make sure he was perfectly safe before kicking off the ground. To say Teddy had enjoyed the ride would have been the understatement of the century. He had laughed, giggled and screamed in glee with every turn and dive Harry had done. As a godparent, Harry couldn't help the surge of pride and joy that crept to his heart at the sight of his godson's elated little face, and he knew, that somewhere, Remus and Tonks were smiling at the choice they had made when they appointed him Teddy's godfather.

Lunch had been an amusing affair for Teddy had wanted to eat absolutely everything the "grown-ups" were having, instead of his own and very boring baby food. The only problem was that Teddy seemed to be as clumsy as his mother had been, so the five of them had ended showered in pudding, shepherd's pie and pumpkin juice. Later, after four friends had showered and magically cleaned their robes, they proceeded to bathe Teddy. However, that was easier said than done because, only an hour later, it became apparent that the four of them had taken another bath while Teddy just laughed hysterically at the "adults".

All in all, it was a very good and refreshing day in the month of September. Early in the evening Harry had let his friends wander around the house to explore it whilst he chose to stay in the master bedroom with his godson. He plopped his head on the pillows and spread his legs over the comfortable mattress, having a perfect view

through the window in front of him of the manor's grounds. He then set Teddy on his stomach and played with the giggling child, holding both of his tiny fists and rubbing his nose against Teddy's tiny one. He smiled sadly as his godson's hair changed to vivid and spiky bubblegum-pink, remembering it had been his mother's favourite ever hair-do. He felt terrible for Remus and Tonks, they wouldn't know what an amazing kid they had had and, even if their counterparts did, they would never be the same Remus and the same Tonks. For all he knew, they could both well be Death Eaters.

He sighed, fatigued. Best not to brood on those dark thoughts, just concentrate on the kid's smiling face.

He was just so beautiful, so innocent, so wonderful...

'Harry,' a voice called. 'Harry, wake up,' someone was shaking him awake, Hermione, he thought.

He opened his eyes and stifled a yawn. He grabbed his glasses on the nightstand and smiled at the toddler who had fallen asleep on his chest, gently sucking his thumb. He gently lifted him into his arms and followed Hermione out of the room, where Ginny and Ron were talking in hushed voices. 'Time to go, Harry. Did you two have a good nap?' Ginny asked, as she ruffled softly the sleeping boy's hair, a twinkle in her eyes.

Harry stifled yet another yawn. 'It was excellent. I didn't know I was that tired,' he whispered, and Ginny rolled her eyes dramatically at him.

Ten minutes later, Harry gave his godson back to Mrs Tonks, the epitome of sadness and despair on his face as he felt the tiny body leave his arms.

Walking away, Ginny laced her fingers with his and kissed him on the cheek. 'You'll make a great father someday, Harry.'

He had never felt so proud in his entire life than at that precise instant.

-oOoOoOoOo-

Ginny, Ron and Hermione had decided to stay a few tombs away, close enough to keep an eye on him should something unexpected occur, but far away enough to give him the privacy he needed.

He bent down and planted a bunch of pink roses on Remus and Tonk's tomb, as he traced his finger around the engraved letters. 'You know, you have an amazing child. You would be so proud of him, he smiles and laughs all the time...' he said quietly to the white graves. 'I'm sorry, Remus. I'm sorry that after all you've suffered, you didn't live long enough to know that little bundle of joy... Thank you for naming me his godfather, Remus, I'm so sorry I called you a coward. You aren't one, of course you aren't... You were – so brave,' he whispered, tears falling on the fresh earth beneath him... 'He's so beautiful, Remus... So beautiful...'

He wiped his face with his sleeve and moved to the left where his parents' graves were, and laid another bouquet of flowers, white lilies. 'Hi mum, dad, it's Harry. I know you can't hear me,' whispered Harry, his eyes leaking once again as he saw the names of his long gone parents before him, the people who had given their lives without any further thought to keep him alive, 'but I just want to say that – I just want to say that I love you. Dad, I forgive you. I am sorry about what I felt when I saw that memory... You were brave, and I knew you really loved mum. I saw – your deaths... I know you couldn't have killed him, but dad, why didn't you keep your wand with you at all times? I felt so lonely without you... But you are my Patronus, dad, you are my guardian. I love you, dad' he sobbed on the gravestone, spilling all of his childhood despairs onto the quiet tomb before him, letting all of the feelings of the solitary withdrawn and unloved little boy he had been pour out of him, tearing his heart in pieces. 'Mum, you were the

best and most beautiful mother ever. You would have lived if it wasn't for me, I am sorry – Merlin I'm so sorry, mum... I love you so much... thank you for the life you have given me... I just – I just wish that none of this had happened. I just wish that you had lived and I had died in your place, I love you...' Harry said finally and then uttered no more, he only cried and wept, blinded by grief, for the parents he never knew, for the broken lives that had given him everything, for the stories and laughs he would never hear about...

Unbeknownst to him, up above, a shooting star soared brightly through the dark skies.

The church clock struck twelve and then, before the disbelieving eyes of his friends, Harry ceased to be the Boy-Who-Lived, the Man-Who-Conquered, the living legend, Gryffindor's Golden Boy, Quidditch Prodigy.

Before the glowing graves of his parents, Harry Potter disappeared from the world as he knew it.

-oOoOoOoOo-

DISCLAIMER: 'yes, my precious, we want it, we crave it' Gollum says insanely, as he appears out of nowhere next to my laptop and Anatomy books, scaring the hell out of me.

'Er, Gollum? Mr Smeagol?' I ask tentatively.

Gollum turns his nasty and, ick, smelly face to me and, oh my giddy aunt Francis, he just smiles wickedly at me, and I shiver involuntarily. Crikey, I'd take all the exams in the world if I could be saved

from that image. 'What is goofy girl doing here, Smeagol asks? We is knowing, oh yes we is, you is wanting to steal the precious from us, we is killing you,' he says threateningly.

Oh for Voldy-poo's left nostril! His sticky and putrid long fingers are too close to my throat for my tastes. Plan B! Plan B! 'Okay Gollum, I don't want you precious – you can leave with it, I won't move. What are you doing here anyway? You belong to Tolkien! Are you in league with Voldemort! But he and all the Potter world belongs to JKR, I swear it on Snoopy! Just leave! Take everything you want from me, but leave my head!' I scream. I knew it, I just knew it. My bloody studies have finally driven me loopy.

Gollum stares at me blankly and then scurries away. Five minutes later, I get up and go to the kitchen. 'I need a large whiskey.'

-oOoOoOoOo-

A/N: I am mental, I know, there's no need for you to tell me that. Oh, before I forget, there's a sentence I used in this chapter, "death, mayhem and all the things orange", which I love but which is not mine. I think I read it on a fic at FFnet a long time ago, but I can't remember it that well. So I apologise if I have taken it from the author, I just like that phrase way too much.

So, what's new? Nothing much, to be honest. Exams are getting way too close for my tastes, so instead of being the usual party girl I am, I've become an isolated hermit over the past two weeks. Oh hell, I sometimes hate Medicine.

So anyway, back to the story, I hope you liked the chapter. I especially liked the scene between Harry and Teddy and, of course, the mock battle with the training dummies. What about you?

I am sorry if some of you think the scene between Harry and Ginny was boring, but I really didn't like how they got together. I mean, for five years they basically don't exchange a word because of Ginny's embarrassing crush on shy Harry but then, a most mysterious and unknown summer happens, and all of the sudden Harry is head-over-heels for Ginny-Bean. No offence to JKR, but I don't really

like how she got those two together.

Oh! I wanted to tell you that I am one of Moxterminator's "Erasing the Future's" betas, so you might find some likeness between my Nostradamus text and a scene of his in chapter 44. Well, just to let all of you know in case some problems arise, he got the idea from my original text when I explained it to him via msn, so that's it and all is well.

Anyway, please please please make my day and review! Longest chapter I've written so far (oh my left toe Archibald! Over 11.000 words long!), so please make me happy and leave a review! Many thanks to the people at FFnet: Lucie, the Dark Czarina, Scurvy, Off My Rocker, PleibolMan, Panther, Lurker, Gryffindork, Jocelyn and many more, I just can't remember all the names... and the People at HPFF: xTimexTurnerx, Anna Maria, Daffy Duck, Jerz, Nol Potter, Marie, RadcliffeFanNumberOne, Merlin's heir... you guys are the best.

As per suggested, I started a Yahoo! Group. I'll probably post chapters there sooner than here and there I will be able to answer anything you want, unlike here where anonymous reviews can't be answered. Please join, I will not spam you. There's a link to it at the bottom of my profile. The address is:

[groups./group/VermouthFanfiction](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/VermouthFanfiction)

May the force be with you,

May you leave me a nice review,

Cheers,

Vermouth

Member of the Siriusan Order

REVISED: 22/04/2008 (Thanks, Hasufel!)

Chapter Six

Brave New World

Harry opened his eyes groggily, wondering where in Merlin's worn pants he was at the moment. Blurry shapes stood unmoving before him; grey, white and black uninviting figures loomed over his disoriented vision. He blinked and shivered, feeling all clammy and chilled to the bone. He hugged his knees blindly, as a sudden heat waved over him. He was developing a fever, he knew that he should move, but he couldn't; he didn't have enough strength. He turned his head upwards; the skies were grey and dull, and he felt his cheeks getting wet from the unforgiving rain, drops falling down his neck and into the hem of his robes, freezing his insides and his heart.

His sight sharpened slightly as he became accustomed to the new light and his unwelcoming surroundings. He was at Godric's Hollow's cemetery, still. But where were his friends, he mused, turning his sore neck around, stopping as he felt his head tighten in dizziness. He tried to get up, but he couldn't get his knees to work properly, they were all shaky and wobbly, so he just settled for sitting down, at least for a while, before he could regain some of his former strength. Burying his head in his lap, he wondered how long he had been at the graveyard for, and why oh why had he been left alone. He slowly raised his head from his uncomfortable position, bracing himself to get up.

But before he could do anything of the sort, he looked at the gravestone in front of him...

The world stopped and something within him exploded.

Harry James Potter

*31st of July, 1980 - † 31st of October, 1981

In innocence thou shalt eternally live

He was there... and yet he was buried six feet under, too. He felt divided, split in two; the true Harry James Potter laying beneath him, his young flesh mouldering in decay, his gleeful childish laughter lost within the depth of the earth... while the carcass of Lily and James Potter's son stood crouched before the gravestone, staring at the white marble stone in pure and open disbelief.

He drew breath sharply and, with all his might, he stood up, shaking his legs, wiping the wetness of his pained face with his sleeves. He stared at the tomb for a few minutes, letting his own grief and hatred uncoil inside of him, pulsing alive through his veins, pumping methodically like an extra heart. So lost he was in his own little world of despair that he barely noticed the wilted flowers that laid on top of the tomb, mimicking the body that was put to rest beneath the earth. He shook his head lightly and sighed.

‘Let Harry James Potter rest in peace; his shell will do the dirty work.’

And he Apparated away, thunder resonating ferociously in his wake.

-oOoOoOoOo-

Tuesday, 1st of November 1981

GODRIC'S HOLLOW ATTACKED!

By Basileus Rickdale

Yesterday night a terrible event took place in the little village of Godric's Hollow, Western England, native town of Godric Gryffindor himself.

The little village of Godric's Hollow, a place where wizards and Muggles alike live in peace and harmony was yesterday night, on Hallowe'en, brutally attacked by He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, who left behind the trail of a slaughter and murder of the most pure of lives: He brought death upon an innocent fifteen month-old boy, Harry James Potter.

James Cygnus Potter and Lily Nicole Potter, parents to Harry James, had been rumoured to be in hiding for quite some time because they were suspected to have been marked as the next victims of You-Know-Who. Shortly after the birth of the small green-eyed boy, the Potters disappeared, vanished, and few people have been able to spot them ever since. The true reason for seeking refuge in hiding hasn't been as of yet publicly divulged, but it is widely known that both Potters are extremely powerful and accomplished wizards, and that was thought to be the reason for being targeted.

However, it seems that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was never after James and Lily Potter, but after their son. What threat could a fifteen month-old pose against the darkest of the Dark Lords? What did the late Potter Heir have that marked him from birth to die at the hand of You-Know-Who? Whatever it was, it was enough reason for Him to seek and kill the child mercilessly.

The Healers have revealed after a post-mortem analysis the child had suffered from a prolonged exposure to both the Cruciatus Curse and the Bone-Breaking Curse, but wasn't killed until struck with the Killing Curse. They have stated that even if he hadn't been hit by the deadly Unforgivable, the child had too many broken bones to live a normal life and the torture he had endured was enough to incapacitate him permanently, driving him into insanity. Disturbed, a Healer informed that some kind of unknown but very dark curse had been placed upon the infant, but none of the Healers at St Mungo's feel they are any closer to deciphering which curse was casted on Harry James, they can only fathom it was something that caused the boy pain beyond anything believable. After reading the clinic results,

one cannot stop the tears leaking down one's face, horrified by the pain that innocent boy suffered until he was struck by death.

But one must ask, "how was He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named able to find the Potters? What sort of concealment charm did the family use to seek protection?"

The truth to those two questions is barely less terrifying than Harry Potter's tragic end: the Potters were betrayed by one of their friends.

Desperate one year-old parents Lily and James Potter went to Chief Warlock Albus Dumbledore for advice, for help. The Supreme Mugwump advised them to set up the tremendously complicated Fidelius Charm, which encases a secret in a single living soul, the Secret Keeper. Nothing can divulge the contents of the guarded secret unless the Keeper decides to reveal it himself, not even Veritaserum. Therefore, the Potters would only pick for the job someone they trusted their lives with: Sirius Black, best friend of James Potter, best man at the Potters' wedding and godfather to little Harry. It has been said that Dumbledore was against that decision, believing there was a leak on his side, that someone was untrustworthy; but James Potter refused to hear a word against his best friend and carried out his intentions. The charm was performed with Dumbledore as the caster, the Potters as the subjects of the charm and Sirius Black as the Secret Keeper.

Now, one week later, the Secret Keeper willingly gave away the information and Harry Potter is dead.

But what isn't known is that the Potters switched the Secret Keepers only three days ago, thinking it would be safer since Black would've have been too obvious for a choice: Sirius Black did not reveal their whereabouts, rather their other childhood friend, Peter Pettigrew.

Pettigrew, the fourth member of the infamous boy-band at Hogwarts, the so-called "Marauders", has been working actively in

You-Know-Who's service for more than a year, leaking all the secrets of the Potter family and from many others of the Light side, leading to the deaths of Gideon and Fabian Prewett and the McKinnons. Yesterday night, after the Potter boy was murdered, Pettigrew was apprehended by Aurors and almost killed by his former friends, Remus Lupin and Sirius Black.

Held at the Ministry under the influence of Veritaserum, Pettigrew spilled all of his secrets to the revolted members of the Wizengamot. He was judged guilty of his crimes and sentenced to be Kissed in the morning.

No-one knows how, but Pettigrew has escaped from a Ministry cell and is now at large. Any sightings of Pettigrew should be immediately informed to the authorities.

But for now, let us pray silently for the innocent life that has been lost. Harry James Potter will be buried today in his babyhood village at sunset, surrounded by those who loved him while he lived.

For baby-photos of Harry James Potter, turn to page 4.

For everything to know about Peter Pettigrew, turn to page 6.

-oOoOoOoOo-

Harry bit his nails.

He smiled ruefully; he could clearly picture in his mind Hermione's stern and disapproving face; but she wasn't there with him to scold him, was she? The worst she could do, Harry mused, was to haunt his dreams and nightmares; but Harry somehow doubted that, were she to appear in one of them, she would start telling him off because of the bad habit he had recently picked up while they had been apart. But then again, he hadn't been himself lately, so who knew? Stranger things had been seen.

He sighed and rubbed his sore calves. He knew he was letting himself go, he knew he had to get out of his trunk and do something more rather than train and study all day, but he just didn't have the strength to do so at the moment. Guess that was what two weeks of being hid away in his isolated trunk, with absolutely no company other than his books and paper clippings, a fortnight of endless training and restless nights could do to a person's sanity.

He wasn't stupid; he knew he had to face the brave new world outside sometime, but he just couldn't – he had tried, really, but it was all so... twisted – that he didn't know if he could cope with it at the present.

He remembered his first day in the new unholy land, he recalled his anger and anguish at the view of his counterpart's gravestone; he remembered walking numbly towards what his former house had been, a sliver of warmth growing inside him at the hope of finding his parents living there – only to have his heart break at the sight of the cottage in Godric's Hollow: damp, derelict, abandoned, eerie and burnt down. He was standing in front of the threshold, his eyes wide open in grief and disbelief at the state of the ruined house, where so many years ago in another life he had been loved, cared for and happy. He had gripped onto the fence tightly in his feverish state, fearing he would fall to the ground, so hard had it been for him to watch the destruction of his family home again.

He had to get out of there, he knew there was nothing left for him in his old town – and he just didn't want to look anymore at the proof of the violence that had torn his family apart on that fateful Hallowe'en so many years ago. He might find his parents or he might not, but they weren't at Godric's Hollow anymore, so what was the use of reminiscing over the ending of what could have been a happy life?

Not knowing where to go in the new unwelcoming land, Harry Apparated to Hogsmeade to reach Hogwarts, the only true home he

had ever known. If he was lucky maybe he could contact McGonagall there or even Snape, and then he would know what had happened to his parents and Sirius. He was just so anxious about them he couldn't think clearly anymore. He needed to know right then what had happened to them. So he started walking towards the path that led to the old school, but when he finally spotted it in the distance, he stopped, rooted to the spot.

Anger, despair and disbelief hit Harry forcefully at the sight of the old castle. It was nothing like he remembered. Instead of standing proud, reflected upon the lake, flanked by the Forbidden Forest, a refuge for those in need, it was nothing else but a decayed shadow of it: black, unwelcoming, dirty, foul. Despite its obvious magnificence and grandeur, the castle emitted waves of putrefaction, as if something was very rotten inside; it was as if Tom Marvolo Riddle had manifested his evil soul and carved it into stone.

Unable to get any closer, Harry decided it was best to come to Hogwarts another time, when he was ready to fight its perversion, and Apparated away.

Two weeks later, Harry was still in his trunk, biting his nails; he still hadn't had the guts to go back to his old school, he just didn't have enough strength to face it at the present time. But then again, who could fault him? After several weeks of doing research in Ravenclaw's National Library, he had slowly and painfully been stripped of everything he had ever held dear: Hogwarts, his beloved Hogwarts was lost to Voldemort, reeking the essence of the Heir of Slytherin; Potter Manor, the place he had recently started calling "home", the inspiration for his loyal trunk – destroyed, nothing but heaps of old stones and debris, burnt pieces of old family portraits, mocking messages left to sneer on the lonely and splintered doors ... And then the Ministry, corrupted by incompetents and bigotry as it had been where he grew up, it was nothing but perfection compared to the new place...

To put it lightly, the Brave New World was completely upside-down.

-oOoOoOoOo-

Wednesday 8th of November 1981

THE BURROW, SEAWOOD COTTAGE AND LONGBOTTOM MANOR RAIDED!

By Anonymous Journalist

If the murder of the youngest of the Potters, barely committed one week ago, hadn't been enough to satisfy You-Know-Who's savage murdering urges, yesterday night a full-scaled slaughter took place in three households, the Weasleys' Burrow, the Tonks' Seawood Cottage and the ancestral Longbottom Manor, leaving no child or adult alive.

As the sun rose over the horizon, three enormous Dark Marks were spotted, one next to Ottery St. Catchpole, where the Weasleys lived, one in Northern Wiltshire, dwelling of the Longbottoms and another near Brighton, home of the Tonks' family. Knowing what they were about to find, the Aurors dashed right away to the Apparition borders at the three places, only to find that all of the previous wards had been brought down. Fear and angst in their faces, they walked into the houses.

'It was horrible,' Auror Scrimgeour confessed, 'I walked into the Longbottoms' house, knowing that they were all dead, but I didn't – we didn't – we weren't prepared to see what they had done... No Killing Curse, just the Slicing Curse for the four members... And what they did to Alice – she was a fellow Auror, you know? I really can't – it's too hard to talk about it...'

One can only wonder in pure horror what the Death Eaters must

have done to Alice Longbottom if a fully-fledged Auror like Scrimgeour finds himself unable to talk about it. Nevertheless, the pure extermination of the last members of the old Longbottom family is something that will surely create an even bigger fear within our hearts than before, knowing how well protected and safe they were, much more so than the rest of the wizarding dwellings.

But not only were the Longbottoms attacked, but so were the Weasleys and the Tonks'. When Aurors reached Seawood Cottage, it was only to find it in shambles, completely destroyed and burnt down. Not much is known about what happened to the three members of three family, parents Andromeda and Ted Tonks and six year-old girl Nymphadora, since there was nothing left of their home but a pile of soot and ashes. It has been, however, confirmed that they are dead because none other than Bellatrix Lestrange left a message for Aurors to find it, claiming that "she was the one responsible for cleansing the unforgivable filth her sister Andromeda had thrown upon the Black family" when she married Muggleborn Ted Tonks.

To find that someone could do that to her own brother-in-law, let alone sister and niece is something that can only make us wonder whether there is something that can stop these hideous attacks. Whether there's some morality, some line the Death Eaters do not dare to walk over. At abominations like these, a journalist can only think from time to time if it would be better if all of us, witches and wizards alike, were wiped off the map and left the Muggles to live peacefully, ignorant to the deadly power we magical people hold.

But the worst attack, worse even than murdering a sister and a niece, was the attack on the Weasleys. Kingsley Shacklebolt, who has recently joined the Auror ranks, has been said to have been moved into St Mungo's Hospital this morning due to the trauma inflicted upon him at the sight of what has been done to the Weasley family.

Arthur Weasley, Head of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office and his wife Molly Weasley, formerly Prewett and sister of the late Fabian

and Gideon Prewett, lived peacefully near Ottery St Catchpole, at The Burrow, a warm place that homed all seven of their children: William (11), Charles(9), Percival(5), the twins Fred and George (3), Ronald (1) and Ginevra (3 months-old).

For some unknown reason, the Weasleys, having removed his eldest son William from Hogwarts at the beginning of September, had decided to go into hiding,, as had before them the Potters, the Longbottoms, and the Tonks'. The reason why all of these families needed to be concealed so obviously from the rest of the wizarding world is still unknown, but there is no point in denying that these close and outrageous deaths are all interconnected. But as all the wards and previous protective magic failed the three former families, the Weasleys were attacked yesterday night too.

Not much has been revealed about their deaths, it has been only said that there were no Killing Curses, only a real bloody massacre. It has been leaked, however, that by the time the Aurors came, nothing could be done, that it had literally been a total butchery.

‘It’s the worst thing I’ve ever seen in my entire life,’ Healer Davis says, ‘if I didn’t know that I was truthfully awake, I could’ve sworn I was trapped in the most terrible of nightmares. You don’t even know what they did – to have to separate pieces and bits of bodies, depending who they had belonged to... And we still haven’t found out anything about the youngest of them, little Ginevra and her brother Charles... I shiver at the thought of what they must have done to them...’

After this last and brutal statement, one can only hope that somehow these disgusting acts of murder will someday stop, that those guilty for committing such heinous crimes will be apprehended, brought to justice and swiftly executed. One can only hope that someday, someone will come and defeat He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, and thanks to that person we will all be able to live in a world where we

don't have to fear for our lives and the lives of our innocent children, a world where fellow pureblood and Muggleborn are treated the same, as people, a world where we can live peacefully and breathe freely, happy to know we are a part of it.

-oOoOoOoOo-

Harry sniffed around and jerked his head to the left; there was something alive in his vicinity. He scrunched his nose, trying to comprehend the smell that was filling his nostrils. It was a small creature, that he was sure of; and a hot-blooded mammal at that. What was it, a rabbit or a squirrel? He pounded his front paws on the soft grass impatiently, it was an impending need to know what animal was nearby, and he wasn't one willing to wait for hours on end without finding the solution to the riddle. He lowered his muscled form to the ground and began walking silently, barely audible among the soft sound the wind caused, the grass below him tickling his belly. Excitement bubbled up in Harry's body, he knew he was getting closer, he knew his prey wasn't far away, he could practically smell the blood flowing through the rabbit's – for he had detected already his victim was a rabbit – veins, he could practically see it scrunching its nose frantically as it scratched its long ears.

Without a second's notice, he jumped from the bushes that were hiding him and onto his unsuspecting victim. He had thought he would catch the unaware rabbit for sure, but the creature's highly developed reflexes caught him by surprise as it squirted away at lighting-speed. But the animal's terror and subsequent flight didn't put him out in the slightest, in fact, he felt much more excited with the thrill of the chase, the knowledge that the creature was running to save its life from his merciless clutches, the small heart beating quickly in its tiny ribcage, waiting from him to stop the melodic sound, the elation the hunt provided him until he pinned it down to the ground, never to let it go again.

Thomp. Eek.

Grrrwawr.

Harry roared triumphantly, he had caught his shivering prey and there was no way it could escape from his strong grip. He felt happy, ecstatic even. He was just about to close his powerful jaws over the poor rabbit's neck when something snapped inside him. Looking down at the shaking creature's body, he sniffed it and suddenly let it go, disgusted at himself as he watched it run away hastily.

Harry morphed back into his human form and walked back to his hidden trunk, massaging his aching belly. It was hard to live on mushrooms and wild berries, but for the moment it just had to do. He couldn't afford running amok in Diagon Alley or the Muggle world. For one, if he went into Diagon Alley without any disguise, people were bound to recognize his characteristic Potter traits. For two, if he hid his face, he might not be recognised, but it would look a tad suspicious and ridiculous if he went all covered up just to buy some food. And of course, the Muggle world was a bit of a jungle for him, since there was no way to know who he could end up encountering, so his aunt and uncle's world was out of the question.

He paced around his room inside his trunk restlessly, finding himself troubled at how much his Animagus form's instincts could take over his human mind. He plopped onto the soft mattress of his bed and kicked his shoes swiftly off his feet and rubbed his forehead absent-mindedly. He had been able to make a full transformation into a lion only a week ago, and no matter how much he tried to control the beast's urges, there was still a part of him that was too weak to fight the animal's sudden wishes. He sighed in defeat, maybe he was having such troubles because he was too tired to fight back.

He remembered with a small smile playing on his lips the first time he had managed to transform into a fully-grown lion. It had been fantastic, wonderful – he felt at ease, powerful, confident, as if nothing or nobody could ever hurt him. He had felt like the king of the

jungle, above everyone else. His senses had all sharpened, his smell was extraordinary and his vision incredible. He was shocked to find when he melted back into his human form that some of the improvements he had acquired while being in the body of a lion remained in his human anatomy: his vision was better, his muscles were more developed than before, his hearing sharpened. It was as if the lion had given him something of its own and, in return, Harry had given the lion what it lacked, a bit of control and a superior intelligence. The only thing he needed to improve until he felt completely satisfied with the animal within him was more control over the beast's killer instincts. If he could only have that, then he would be at total peace with that form and move on comfortably to achieve the following one, the basilisk.

Admittedly, he didn't know where he stood with the thought that he could be the same animal as the one he had slaughtered a few years ago down in the Chamber of Secrets. It was unnerving and unpleasant, and for some reason that evaded his own understanding, ever since he had started on that specific transformation, willing his magic to run through his veins to morph his body into the new form, he had begun feeling guilty at the memory of the basilisk's death, as if he were nothing else but traitorous scum that had killed a fellow friend for no reason whatsoever. He knew he was being ridiculous, because if he hadn't, then both Ginny and himself would have been lying six feet under for over a while; but he still couldn't erase the guilt from his heart.

‘Give it up, mate, or you'll end up loonier than before,’ he chastised himself.

Be that as it may, he knew he needed it to perfect that form, it would come in extremely useful in battle: just one glance and – zap – it was nice knowing you, Death Eater! Cheers.

But he still didn't like the fact that his hands could end up bloodied by

murder. It was war, that was true, but that didn't mean he had to like it. He sighed tiredly - no eighteen year-old should have to face what he did; boys of his age should be worrying about girls and their future careers, not hunting down psychedelic psychos through different dimensions.

‘But you are Harry Potter – how could you actually expect any less?’ he mused scathingly.

Maybe things would have been easier if he had his friends with him. At first, he had decided to leave them where they were, safe and sound in his old world. He knew he was being selfish, but he felt that he had a right to be so after all he had lived through, after all the deaths he had been forced to face. But he had soon realised that without them he was truly nothing, and in one night of pure despair, he had given up his intention of carrying out his plans alone and rolled up his left sleeve, where he had imprinted on himself a magical tattoo with his three Animagus forms. He didn't like it, but he realised that Hermione was right when she told him that if they all got the design on their left forearms, it would look much less suspicious as it could be taken for the Dark Mark. He had pointed his wand to his new and still sore tattoo to call them to him, but nothing worked, they didn't appear before his eyes out of thin air. He tried everything, even summoning them in Parseltongue, but it yielded no result other than his own frustration.

So he was left alone, in his trunk, hidden within the woods he had sought out, the Forest of Dean, the best place he had come up with to remain inconspicuous. He couldn't deny the fact that staying there, hidden while he prepared himself, made him feel as if he were closer to his friends, what with having been holed up in there with Ron and Hermione in a scruffy tent while they searched for the Horcruxes.

He covered himself with the mattress when he finished removing the majority of his clothes and rolled over to his stomach, fisting his hand

and letting his chin rest on it. He knew he was procrastinating and that he should be looking for allies, the Horcruxes and ways to bring his friends to him, but he convinced himself he needed a few weeks to get accustomed to the new world and its ways, he had to swallow all the new information and dig upon the secrets of other people lest he made an unwise move.

He would have to come out and break out a whole bloody war, but for the moment he decided he would hone his skills and perfect the last and most difficult of his three forms, the phoenix, the symbol of birth and hope.

‘Hope, yeah, right,’ Harry snorted disdainfully, ‘don’t think I can dare to hope to live to my twentieth birthday party.’

-oOoOoOoOo-

Saturday, 3rd of April 1982

YOU-KNOW-WHO DEFEATED BY DUMBLEDORE!

By Bromilda Merryweather

That’s right, folks: YOU-KNOW-WHO HAS BEEN BESTED BY DUMBLEDORE! After years of suffering, years of trials and battles, of murder, of loss, of despair – it has all come to an end when Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts’ School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, emerged the clear victor of the greatest duel every seen by human eyes at the bay of Southampton.

Yesterday night, the last of the Light’s forces clashed against the Dark army in the South of England, spreading the battle from Southampton to Brighton as the sun set over the horizon leaving a bloody trail behind in its descending path. Dumbledore’s last men, a miscellaneous group of trained Aurors, Unspeakables, Ministry

officials and old students loyal to him followed him into the fight, knowing it might be their last day on earth, fighting for our freedom.

The battle went on and on, with the death toll increasing by the minute. No side went to make prisoners of war, they threw all caution to the wind in front of Muggles and struck with the deadliest spells they knew to bring down the enemy. Not many things are known from the final battle apart from the blinding beams of light thrown at every side and the mounting numbers of dead bodies from both sidelines.

But the Light side wasn't being favoured. There were too many Death Eaters, too many werewolves, vampires, giants, banshees... and when it seemed that nothing could get any worse, You-Know-Who appeared, striking Dumbledore's followers one by one in a quick succession.

And that's when Albus Dumbledore turned on his feet and faced He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. It has always been said that the Headmaster was the only one You-Know-Who ever feared and it appears to be so with a reason. Long-time friend Elphias Doge revealed excitedly this morning that he had never seen anything like it before, that their fight had been a true duel between real titans, magic cracking the air, but no sound coming out of their mouths, the most impressive of the powers being displayed as both fought for their lives. It was a very well matched duel, the two combatants tremendously skilled and powerful, but in the end only one could win and Albus Dumbledore triumphed over He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named with a final Killing Curse.

The Ministry is now a complete pandemonium, parties are breaking out in broad daylight, everyone is celebrating out in the streets, Death Eaters are being apprehended as I write this article, Muggles are being Obliviated, children are wandering freely along the streets, Dumbledore's being toasted at every wizarding home.

WE ARE FREE!

-oOoOoOoOo-

Days rolled by and soon October was nearing its end. Harry walked along a little path within the woods, lifting his head from time to time to glance at the falling leaves, the shrivelled trees and occasionally kicking some of the little stones he found on his way. He shivered unconsciously and wrapped his cloak tightly around his body; it was getting cold. He wondered briefly whether his mum and dad would have taken him out for a while on a beautiful autumn day like that one had they had the chance; if they would still do if he ever got to find them.

For Harry now knew they were alive – well, he couldn't be one hundred percent sure when it came to his mother, but he didn't want to bring his hope down, not when he had searched and searched but still didn't find any obituary with her name on it. His father, on the other hand, he knew was live because Harry had most mysteriously stopped wearing the Head of House Ring and only bore the Potter Heir one, and that had to mean that somehow and somewhere his dad was alive. He was desperate to meet the man that gave him his Patronus form, eager to find out how he truly was and not just hear stories about either how great or how conceited he had been, but nothing came out of his endless and restless hours of research and he knew he'd have to quit going to Ravenclaw's library soon since he was running out of the Polyjuice Potion Hermione had brewed for him before he disappeared.

Reaching the borders of the Forest of Dean, Harry sighed and pulled his hood over his cloak after checking and rechecking he had packed everything and that his protective vest was securely wrapped around his chest - if there was one lesson he had learnt from Moody it was that one could never be careful enough. When everything seemed to be alright, even up to the old deceased Auror's standards, Harry Apparated away.

It was time to go back into the real world.

-oOoOoOoOo-

Friday 10th of April 1992

HE-WHO-MUST-NOT-BE-NAMED RETURNS!

By Armenius Wraughtsbridge

A decade of peace, a decade of not fearing for our lives and the lives of our family is over. Yesterday night, one week after Dumbledore announced his return to the disbelieving public, You-Know-Who made an open appearance by murdering Amelia Bones, Head of the Magical Law Enforcement Department in the very core of the Ministry of Magic, letting all of us know crystal clear that his second reign of terror has begun.

For seven days the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot has proclaimed that You-Know-Who is back, that he was never truly gone, only biding his time until he could regain his body – but no-one, dare I say it, wanted to believe him, no matter how hard Albus Dumbledore has fought for our freedom, no matter that he was the one that brought He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named down over a decade ago, giving us all these ten years of peace and content.

Minister Cornelius Fudge was reluctant to hear any of Dumbledore's words and even got as far as proclaiming him senile and inadequate for the position of responsibility he held in Justice, but never had the opportunity in only a week's time to ban him from the Wizengamot and strip him of all of his medals and awards as it was rumoured he intended to do. But now, with the crushing evidence of You-Know-Who's return, the Minister is in for a deal of trouble for not acknowledging Dumbledore's pleas to take immediate action against Him and his Death Eaters.

One week ago, on the 3rd of April, a date that symbolised the conquer of good against evil, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named by means of some most mysterious object that was being kept at Hogwarts' School of Witchcraft and Wizardry for sake-keeping, returned from his previous state of a mere spirit into is all-time feared human form, aided by the inconspicuous Professor Quirinius Quirrel, who had been secretly helping him all this year, first attempting to steal the object that had been before lying in the Gringotts' vault that was broken into last 31st of July, and then throughout the academic year, although how he managed to do that is still unknown. From the moment Dumbledore realised the object, which he didn't dare to reveal to the open public, was removed from its apparently safe hidden place, he knew that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was back and tried to pull all of his strings at the Ministry to build an army against him again, but few listened to the Chief Warlock.

But now the evidence he is back is incontrovertible, and we must brace ourselves for what is to come. There are still many Death Eaters that were not apprehended the last time, the most dangerous and notorious of them being the Lestranges, Bellatrix and Rodolphus, who are widely known for their cruelty and the pleasure they take in breaking their victims.

The Ministry will soon publish some pamphlets for the safety of our families and send them to our homes.

May Merlin have mercy on our souls.

-oOoOoOoOo-

Harry materialised out of thin air at a Ministry-approved Apparition Point in Diagon Alley, just next to the entrance to Knockturn Alley. Well, he hoped it was still approved in the new world, it wouldn't do him much good if he crashed into someone the minute he decided to get in touch with other humans, no matter how well he disguised

himself. He checked for the hundredth time his hood was still in place and that his face was still fully covered before stepping completely into Diagon Alley.

The sight that met him didn't come as something unexpected but it still crushed his heart. The cobbled and busy street that had shown him that magic truly existed when he first stepped into the world that had dubbed him as the Boy-Who-Lived so many years before was nothing but a mere unrelated memory when compared to the Diagon Alley of this world. If Harry hadn't known they were actually the same place, he would have never made the connection between the crowded street he walked along so many times before and the empty and grey one he was at presently. Broken tiles lay splattered along the pedestrian street, pieces of wood hung loosely from the dusty and chiselled doors, dirty crystals covered the inside of the few opened shops to passers-by, a tense air filled his nostrils. The scene reminded him of those Western cowboy movies he had seen when he lived at the Dursleys, lying flatly on his stomach, hidden from view beneath Dudley's massive bed, watching excitedly as the good and handsome guy drew his gun and pointed it at the bad and ugly guy. Well, to be honest, no, that image was not the one that he had sprung to his mind when he'd seen the new Diagon Alley; as far as he could see there was no ugly and bad guy around and he most certainly wasn't a handsome cowboy. What had reminded him so much of the Western films was the isolated and abandoned landscape, with no other people around, the wind blowing savagely against his face. Toss in some of those fluffballs and a mysterious whistling tune and he might as well be filming one of those movies.

Harry snorted. 'Mate, you are losing it.'

He made his way at a quick pace toward Gringott's, the wizarding bank run by goblins, somewhat hoping that he would not encounter Griphook. Granted, the Griphook in the new world wouldn't know him at all since he was supposed to be dead and also his face was completely hidden from view, but he would surely sense he was

uneasy with him, and that would look a tad suspicious to the sly creature. He sighed inwardly - if he ever got to see his Kingsley again he would have to thank him properly for the robes he was wearing, he knew he owed him big time. He still didn't know how the Minister had managed to do it, but he was grateful he had given him some of the Unspeakable robes. They just had to be the most comfortable ones he had ever worn; they were just about perfect, they fitted him everywhere like no other cloth had ever done. The first time he had tried them on, he was a wee bit sceptical about them, because it looked as if they were just like a massive black handkerchief, not humanly defined, but as soon as he had touched them, they had sprung into life nearly making his heart stop and surrounded him magically, enveloping his body snugly and comfortably, allowing him every single movement he desired, as if he was were naked. Thankfully, he wasn't, but he still had the freedom of walking starkers without the embarrassment of doing so. He had to admit that to someone else, the sight of him in his Unspeakable robes might be somewhat creepy, since where his boyish face should have been, with them on there was nothing else but a black pit from which two green orbs shone from time to time, but he couldn't do anything about it. Kingsley had told him that his eyes weren't supposed to be seen at all, but that for some strange reason that wasn't happening to him. Still, it wasn't that terrible, at least he would be able to repel people due to his eerie appearance.

With those thoughts in mind, he entered the wizarding bank apprehensively. He needed to change a great sum of wizard money into Muggle money. He had decided to buy a place of his own in the outskirts of Muggle Edinburgh, so he needed to change his money. At first he had thought about moving into Grimmauld Place since, technically it was still his so the wards should theoretically still recognise him, but then he had vetoed against the idea for two reasons; firstly, he knew that Sirius was still alive somewhere, so it wouldn't be a good idea to claim it as his if he wanted to remain anonymous for a little longer; secondly, if he wanted to cast a Fidelius Charm over a property of his, it wouldn't be the greatest idea

of them all to do it in the middle of London on a house he was positive Voldemort knew about. He would have to go into Grimmauld Place sometime soon to see if the Slytherin Locket was still there, but he wouldn't be setting the Black House as his headquarters if he could avoid it.

He glanced around realising the bank was pretty much the same as it had been back in his old life. The only big difference between them was the lack of customers; only a few humans could be seen amongst the dwindled population of goblins. As he made his way to the nearest teller, he noticed some of the looks that were being shot at him. Surprised at the odd demeanour that seemed to have possessed the rest of the people inside the bank, it dawned on him that people were parting, providing him a clear path to the closest goblin stand, fear etched on their faces. He was really aching to know why they seemed so scared of him, but he refrained himself; he was looking quite creepy and intimidating at the moment, after all. However, things started looking too weird and uncomfortable for him when he noticed that the goblin attending him didn't even spare him a curious look at his request to change that impressive amount of money he placed before its eyes on a bottomless pouch, the goblin merely kept his eyes down, verifying the bag contained the sum of money Harry had said it did and then proceeded to place in front of him stacks of Muggle notes: the goblin was shivering in fear, too.

Bemused, he nodded to the goblin and headed towards the exit, hoping to find out what on earth could have scared one of the ever impartial and undeterred goblins. As he was about to reach the door, a woman blocked him with her opulent body, her three children and the countless bags she was carrying. She seemed to be sorting out her purchases before she left the bank while her oddly quiet and well-behaved children, one of whom was incessantly tugging at her robes while looking at him with wide eyes.

‘Not now, dear. Give me a minute and then you can tell me

anything when we get back home,' she admonished the little boy without sparing him a single glance.

But the boy didn't stop, and one of his two brothers had already noticed the source of the boy's odd demeanour: Harry. Just as he was about to ask the woman politely to please move so he could get away from there – and from the children who were making him so uneasy – the smallest of the boys turned his round face to him and then whimpered and made a puddle at his feet.

'Oh, honestly, William,' said the woman absent-mindedly, bending down to clean her child with a flick of her wand, ever oblivious to Harry's confused presence. 'If your papa hadn't said that you were all to be away from home as the wards were set up again, I would have left you there. You can't just come into the bank and wet yourself,' she said, wiping William's blond hair off his face.

Harry had had enough. 'Excuse me, ma'am?'

'Yes dear?' she asked, while she still checked William was clean enough.

'Could you please move? It's just that you are blocking the way,' he said as calmly as he could, doing his best to ignore the three children staring fixedly at him.

'Oh yes, I am so – you're him! You are Ares!' she screamed as she grabbed her children and swiftly disappeared via Portkey, leaving half of her purchases behind.

To say that Harry was shocked beyond words would have been the understatement of the year. He briefly considered the option he was

still dreaming and hadn't woken up yet, because the idea that everyone in this world had gone nutters didn't sound that appealing to him. He wondered who the blazes that woman had confused him with, who that Ares guy that frightened her so was. He shrugged inwardly - it had to be some Death Eater he had never heard of, he thought as he walked to the nearest Ministry-approved Apparition Point. But before he decided to pop away, both of his wands which were currently strapped to the holsters he had placed on his forearms moved. Arching an eyebrow, he looked around.

'Ollivander's?' he asked, flummoxed.

He entered the shop, grimacing at the shrill sound the door made and sneezed unwillingly, the dust inside making his nose tingle unpleasantly. As soon as he approached the counter and before the shop-keeper made his appearance, he saw the endless piles of wands begin to stir and vibrate softly at first, and then more and more forcefully.

'Good morning, Mr - ?' a soft voice said.

Harry turned around. Sure enough, Ollivander was there, as creepy as always, with his silver eyes and wizened face. 'You don't know who I am?' he asked blankly, he had been sure the wandmaker would somehow know who he was, seeing as he had always had that infuriating ability.

'I am afraid I do not, Mr Mysterious; but you are having some serious effect on my wands,' said Ollivander, his eyes gleaming in unhidden curiosity.

'Well then I guess I'd better say nothing at all. I wish to remain

anonymous, Mr Ollivander,' Harry said more calmly than he felt, his voice rising amidst the deafening sounds the wands and boxes were emitting.

‘Indeed, Mr Unknown. However, I feel as if I had met you before, and you are not an enemy,’ said Ollivander smoothly, turning his eyes to his shop. ‘Now let’s see what happens, I have never heard of such an extraordinary thing like this before,’ he finished nonchalantly, as if he were talking about something as common and usual as the weather in Scotland.

Suddenly, the boxes stopped moving while Harry’s wands jerked madly in their holsters as another box flew straight onto Harry’s hand. Bemused, he glanced at Ollivander, who nodded at him briefly in approval and then lifted the lid. Harry gasped, not noticing Ollivander’s eyes widening in recognition: it was the counterpart of his holy and phoenix feather wand. Just then, his other two wands flew straight out of their containers and Harry had to do his best to keep his eyes open, the amount of light inside the shop blinding him.

The red gleam that invaded the shop was hurting his green orbs, and through narrowed eyes he could see that Ollivander had crouched down, his hands on his face, protecting his eyes. He could feel the magical power around him, so free, so forceful that it made him dizzy; but just as suddenly and unexpectedly as it had started, it stopped, and Harry had to blink twice before his vision worked properly again.

‘My, oh my – how extraordinary!’ said Ollivander next to him, his voice filled with childish glee.

‘Er – what?’ said Harry blankly, his head still spinning. He turned around to see what had caught the wandmaker’s eye so much.

His jaw dropped two feet.

Instead of three wands, two of them completely identical, now stood before his eyes, in Ollivander's wrinkled and bony hands one sole wand, a bit longer than any of the others had been before, red as his own blood, gleaming proudly against the shop-keeper's dull skin.

He picked it up gingerly with two of his fingers, but as his hand made contact with the piece of wood, warmth stronger than he had never imagined possible took over him, lifting his heart and bringing an unwitting smile to his lips. It was natural – it was wonderful...

‘Wicked!’

‘Indeed,’ said the Ollivander, his face scrunched in concentration.

‘Now that will be all. If you could please leave seven Galleons on the counter before you leave,’ he continued silkily as Harry blushed and went straight for his pouch. ‘Excellent, Mr Anonymous. Now this meeting between you and me will remain a secret, and no harm shall befall us.’

‘I expect I shall be hearing a lot from you from now on. Good day to you, Mr Potter.’

-oOoOoOoOo-

Tuesday, 9th of June 1992

BARTY CROUCH JUNIOR: THE NEW MINISTER FOR MAGIC!

By Mildred Yaxley

We have all been feeling for quite some time that old Minister Cornelius Fudge was not up to the job, we have on numerous accounts protested, saying that Fudge lacked proper wizard pride and that his methods of leading such a powerful nation as Britain were insufficient; but until yesterday, none of our rightful complaints were acknowledged: yesterday night Cornelius Fudge was voted out of his office by the newly reformed Wizengamot and Barty Crouch Junior appointed as the new Minister for Magic.

Young Bartemius Crouch, son of the famous and driven to insanity by a group of terrorists Barty Crouch Senior, has proved on numerous accounts to be an incredible asset in reinforcing the Ministry from within. An incredibly capable wizard, Barty Crouch is the youngest ever to hold a position of such power and responsibility.

‘ I didn’t actually expect to have the Wizengamot put such confidence in me,’ he admitted, somewhat bashfully, ‘but I can promise I have many ideas to improve this nation and ascend it to the position of respect it should hold in front of the whole world. We have very exciting times ahead of us.’

When asked about what he planned to do against the Dark Lord’s second rise, the Minister assured he would do everything in his power to ensure the safety of the wizarding families, to protect the magical people. Clearly, the new Minister for Magic is exactly what this country needs, a whole new revolution from which we shall be reborn from our ashes, greater than we ever were.

-oOoOoOoOo-

Harry wiped the sweat off his forehead, for it had been a very tiring day. He removed his sticky shirt from his body and slumped on a couch in front of the chimney, kicking off his shoes and socks in one movement and pouring himself a glass of Firewhiskey. Stirring his glass cautiously, he smiled as he remembered the time Ron had

convinced Ginny, Hermione and himself to get drunk. Well, actually convinced Hermione and himself, Ginny was all for it since the beginning.

He sipped a bit from his glass. He'd rather drink like this, slowly, enjoying the whiskey, rather than getting his brains fried with too much of it. He ran a hand through his hair, his mind running through all the things he had done that day.

He had woken up from a nightmare before the break of dawn drenched and hyperventilating, but thankfully it had nothing to do with a Voldemort-induced night terror. No, it was a just one simple and everyday nightmare, nothing special and psychedelic about it; but it was still terrifying. He guessed all that rubbish he had read from the newspapers and his own anxiety had triggered it, because his dream was certainly related to everything he had learnt over the last few weeks in the new unwelcoming land. Still, at the end of the day he couldn't really remember what it had been about, so it wasn't really that important.

After having taken a shower, he had decided to continue setting up the wards of the house he had recently bought. It wasn't much of a home per se, since in his opinion home was where they heart is, and his heart was somewhere very far away, but it was welcoming enough. It had cost him more than he thought it would, but then again, it was a comfortable two-floor house with a nice garden on the outskirts of Edinburgh, and besides he had never had any proper education when it came to Muggle finances. He snorted in his drink at the mental image that crossed his mind, featuring a patient Uncle Vernon explaining to a clueless Harry about money and how to invest it wisely.

His house was nice enough and it would certainly do for headquarters of the resistance he was planning on starting soon enough. After having made sure the basic wards were up, he crossed his fingers and closed his eyes and called for Kreacher,

hoping that the bond between Master and House-elf worked between cross-worlds. To his utmost delight, it had worked perfectly and now Harry had some company and the reassurance he would be properly fed, no more mushrooms and no more berries, nothing else but succulent and mouth-watering homemade meals, thank you very much. Well, if he ever saw Mrs Weasley again, at least she wouldn't have to fuss over him saying that he was underfed.

So now the wards had been set up and he had decided to use Kreacher as the Secret-Keeper for the Stranger Sanctuary, as he had decided to call his newly acquired house, Well, it made sense to call it that, he was a stranger in a forsaken world, someone who shouldn't even be there, and since he was planning on defeating the current dictatorial regime and ban everyone who bore the Dark Mark or had ill intentions towards him from the house, it could be perfectly called a sanctuary for those in need. The final wards he wanted to set up were a bit more complicated and considered to be Dark Magic. It wasn't as horrible as the Cruciatus Curse or anything of the sort, but it required a blood sacrifice from the person who wanted to build the protection, and that was something that was heavily frowned upon in the Light circles.

Still, it would be the ultimate protection against Death Eaters, he just needed a fellow wizard he trusted enough to carry it out. Kreacher, as a House-Elf, was magically powerful, but he was blissfully ignorant when it came to the ways of Dark Magic and theoretical knowledge. No, he needed someone from his side that actually knew about the Dark Arts, someone like Snape; although he wasn't that sure he would enjoy having his former Potions Professor in that situation, with his bat-like tendencies and disrespectful ways angering him. One thing was sure, there was no way he would let a woman look over him. No, thank you; it was bad enough to have another man in that position, let alone letting a woman fuss around him when he had to perform the ritual naked. No way, he probably wouldn't be able to concentrate on the wards, he'd be too embarrassed.

Sighing, he got up and went to the nearest table, where he had spread a pair of maps and plans and a couple of confidential files. Who knew that blackmail and coercion could work so well in the underground London when wearing his frightening Unspeakable robes. He was still at a loss as to why people seemed so unnaturally scared of him dressed like that. Granted, he wasn't looking especially friendly wearing black from head-to-toes, his green eyes shining from the black hole that was his face from time to time; but to have a mother run away from him, screaming for bloody murder? To have Borgin stuttering incoherently? Well, he was intimidating dressed like that, there was no point in denying it since it was the truth, but he certainly didn't consider himself as if he were Voldemort in the flesh!

He took another sip of whiskey. 'Ares... Ares... Who are you?' he mused, placing the glass on top of the table and rolling the maps up, tying a band around them and moving them towards the nearest shelf. He had heard that name mentioned whenever he made an appearance, next to the name "Unmentionable", but he still didn't have a clue as to what people were talking about, and he didn't want to dig in too deep, he needed to keep his identity well hidden until it was time to reveal himself.

He scratched the back of his head and sat down again, trying to focus into clearing his mind. He had been practising his Occlumency shields daily and, very slowly, he could see that he was improving. He would never be a natural Occlumens like Voldemort or Dumbledore, not even one as skilled as Snape, but he could get to be proficient enough in the subject. He had learned from Kingsley that the first step into succeeding in the matter was to be at ease with himself, not blissfully happy, but comfortable with the person he had become. A few months ago that proposition would have been laughable, but right now Harry felt much more at ease with his personality. If he was content with the person he had grown into, then it wouldn't be too difficult to immerse himself in his own mind and stay there comfortably. However, if one were over-confident or

arrogant, he would never reach the mind in his soul, for he would become too distracted and marvelled by its surroundings. The key was equilibrium: he knew who he was, he knew he had more things to live for rather than die battling. He wasn't arrogant, but he was more confident in his abilities than he had ever been before. He was taking control of his own life, he wasn't letting someone else decide for him; he wanted to fight because he wanted to live his life to its fullest, not because it was his destiny.

Breathing amply, Harry focused inwardly, searching for his mind, deep within his soul. About one minute later, a gleaming castle came into view: Hogwarts. As he had seen in his Animagus Potion-induced vision, the form his mind had taken was the gleaming castle he had always called home, where he felt the safest and the warmest, where his best memories had happened. He entered and smiled at the sunny ceiling, making his way towards past the Gryffindor table and into the corridor that led him to the Transfiguration classes, where he had placed all of his thoughts and knowledge about the matter. He opened and grinned at the increasing shelves, packed with little orbs that represented what he had learnt. He approached the shelf dedicated to his Animagus abilities and picked the one he had been gradually filling with his latest training, turning into a phoenix. He hadn't improved that much on the transformation, but at least he was able to produce a beak and some red feathers. He then placed the orb back to its rightful place and cast a pair of cleaning charms on the classroom; it helped to keep his memories intact and not become distorted with random thoughts.

He exited the classroom thoroughly satisfied and walked past the Charms corridor. He had designed his mind in such a way that thoughts and pieces of information came faster and more accurately than they ever had before. If he had learnt to organise his mind before he came into Hogwarts, he was sure he would've been one of the best students of his year. But as it was, no-one could ever be at the top of the year with a mind that looked like World War III.

He kept his adventures in the third floor beneath the trapdoor in what had been Fluffy's room. He kept the good times with his friends in the Gryffindor common room, his private moments with Ginny in the Room of Requirement; everything related to battle and Voldemort down in the Chamber of Secrets, where only a Parselmouth like himself could gain access to; his darkest hours and grief in Dumbledore's office, where Fawkes would try to lift his spirits; his Patronus-worthy memories hidden in the Mirror of Erised...

All in all, Snape would have been proud of the vast improvement Harry had made in the subtle art of Occlumency. He was actually aching to try Legilimency, but he knew better than to practice it before he had mastered its opposite, he could end up locked, spilling all of his secrets.

He smiled once more and retreated from his mind, opening his eyes. He stood up and went to his bedroom. Waving his hand, he lit a fire and covered himself with the warm duvet. He sighed comfortably - tomorrow would be another day.

Tomorrow he would start his Horcrux hunt: Number Twelve Grimmauld Place.

-oOoOoOoOo-

Tuesday, 23rd of June 1992

ALBUS DUMBLEDORE: LIFE-SENTENCE IN AZKABAN FOR TREASON!

By Rigoberta Nott

None of us ever thought Albus Dumbledore capable of committing such atrocity, but yesterday morning he was found and brought down by His Excellency the Dark Lord after having murdered our esteemed Minister's insane father, Bartemius Crouch Senior.

Albus Dumbledore, once the leader of the Western world and champion of the crowds; aided by his group of terrorists “The Order of the Phoenix”, has been continuously threatening the society we have all fought so hard to build, a society where there is a proper order and a proper respect to the wizarding kind. But Dumbledore and his allies have again and again refused to settle down in this glorious country and, instead of fleeing, they have tried to bring it down illegally and by force.

It was suspected Dumbledore had driven Bartemius Crouch Senior to insanity, but it was never confirmed until His Excellency the Dark Lord managed to get a confession out of the ancient warlock by means of Veritaserum, proving that not only had Dumbledore tortured the Minister’s father but also murdered him! Now, we always knew that Dumbledore and the Minister had never seen eye-to-eye, but this act to cripple the Ministry is one of the most heinous and despicable acts that can be committed.

‘No words can express how much the loss of my father has affected me,’ confessed the grieving Minister, ‘but at least I can take comfort in the fact that the culprit has been apprehended and no-one else will suffer from his acts.’

Most of us are asking for Dumbledore’s head on a spike, but His Excellency the Dark Lord is merciful as always and has decided it best to keep him in Azkaban, serving a life-sentence so he can purge and redeem himself. We can only thank Slytherin we have been blessed with such an omniscient and omnipotent ruler, his very own descendant, the Dark Lord. Whatever did we do to be so fortunate?

-oOoOoOoOo-

The path to Number Twelve Grimmauld Place was practically deserted on that Hallowe’en evening. The streetlamps lit the cobbled

street dimly, giving the area an eerie glow. Harry walked quickly, hidden under his Invisibility Cloak, not wanting to linger around, just in case someone noticed some strange happenings or some headless voice talking.

It barely took him a couple of minutes to reach where the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black should have been, between number eleven and number thirteen. But there was nothing between them, no number twelve. That could only mean one thing.

‘Grimmauld Place is under the Fidelius.’

Fidelius or no Fidelius, Harry knew that nothing could prevent its rightful owner from entering the property, because if it did, it would be usurping something that was entitled to him, and the charm wouldn’t work properly. He would have to find out who had cast it and what his intentions were, though. If they were on the same side, the Grimmauld Place could be used for whatever the caster wanted; if not... well, he may humour him for a while. Bearing in mind that no matter how the door should appear to him because he had both the Black blood running through his veins and he had inherited the Black legacy from Sirius when he died, he approached the fence and cleared his throat.

‘I, Harry James Potter, grandson of Dorea Black and heir to Sirius Black, command the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black to open its doors to me,’ he ordered in an authoritative voice.

Something clicked and out of nowhere a black board appeared in front of him.

‘Password? You are asking for a password?’ Harry said in disbelief. Now that was something he had never expected, and he didn’t think

Kreacher would have lied to him or given him half-truths about the matter. The problem was, what could the password be? Somehow he doubted it would be something related to sweets, the Black family didn't seem all that keen on candy. So what would the logical password for the Blacks be?

‘How could I ever be so stupid?’ he groaned, ‘Toujours Pur!’

Out of thin air, Number Twelve Grimmauld place appeared before his eyes as gloomy and dark as always, and Harry couldn't help smirking smugly at its sight. He crossed the threshold and entered the derelict house, his nostrils being invaded by some putrid smell that made his stomach churn violently. The house was different than he remembered, it was more intimidating, more unwelcoming than it had ever been before, even worse than the first time he stepped into it, in the summer before his fifth year at Hogwarts.

‘Homenum Revelio!’ he whispered, but nothing happened, no-one was in the house. Breathing freely again, he waved his hand to ignite the gas lamps and walked as silently as he could past Mrs Black's sleeping portrait. It wouldn't do him much good if the blasted woman started yelling at the top of her lungs. He walked to the stairs, glancing around. He was repulsed by the house, it was even crueller and more threatening than it had ever been before; clearly Sirius didn't live there, it probably was as it had been before the Order had started cleaning it. He was amazed at the fact that Sirius had been able to live in that house for as long as he did; the Dursleys looked tame and friendly in comparison to the Blacks. He climbed the stairs to the first floor, trying to remember where the locket had been in his own world. Smiling sadly, he realised that he lacked Hermione's outstanding brains. ‘Accio Slytherin Locket!’

A buzz and then one zooming sound later, the locket was secure in his hands. Smirking slightly he went for the exit, descending the

stairs. He knew he couldn't linger, it wasn't safe; he had managed to get what he needed, his task was done, and now he had to leave.

‘Oo ze ‘ell arg yoo?’

Harry nearly jumped out of his skin in surprise. Slowly, dreading who he might find, he turned around.

A boy of his age, maybe a bit older was standing before him, brandishing his wand at him. He had dark wavy hair and bright grey eyes, his complexion was fair and if it hadn't been for the look of distrust and malevolence he had, he might have been good-looking. His mouth was twisted in a sneer and, by the sound of his familiar accent, Harry guessed he had to be French. The boy was robed in black, his hood was pulled down and his sleeves rolled up, with a clear design on his left forearm.

Shit, Harry cursed – a Death Eater!

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Saturday, 15th of August 1992

BUILDING A BETTER FUTURE: SLYTHERIN SCHOOL

By Meghara Avery

We will never be grateful enough to His Excellency the Dark Lord for all of his outstanding efforts to improve the world that had been left in decay, to wipe off the unworthy from our gifted magical society, to reconstruct a place where witches and wizards should be proud of their prestigious heritage without having hooligans and terrorists besmirching our noble genealogy. But still, the Dark Lord never rests and has yet come up with a new idea to make our lives better: his new project on the British School of Witchcraft and Wizardry,

Hogwarts.

The ever genius mind of the Dark Lord, concerned about the future witches and wizards that will someday be in charge of our country, has come up with a revolutionary idea to improve the magical education of our children, to unite all the Hogwarts' Houses under the prestigious name of the Slytherin House, the best House of them all.

It is known by all of us the existence of open hostility between the four Houses, hostility that has even reached violence between the most vocal of them, Slytherin and Gryffindor. While Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff usually sit on the side-lines, silently supporting those foolish Gryffindors, the noble House of Slytherin has always had to look after itself, has always had to stand up for its ideology against the narrow-minded and prejudiced Gryffindors, Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs.

Of course, no-one can entirely blame them, children will be children after all; because it's a riot that started nearly a thousand years ago, when the school was founded and the rivalry between Gryffindor and Slytherin ascended to such a point where the latter had to escape the school for the fear of his life, knowing that he left it to the other three founders, knowing that things could only go downhill from there. Surprisingly enough, the school has lasted much longer than anyone could have expected, bearing in mind the short-sightedness of the other three Houses; but the violence toll has never dwindled, but has, in fact, increased over the last thirty years. Because of that, our esteemed Dark Lord had deemed it essential to unite all young witches and wizards under the same banner, the banner of the Snake, and from it a new united era of witches and wizards shall arise, without that trivial enmity and towards a new and more secure future.

In addition to that reform, the Dark Lord has found it terribly important to let the children learn the Dark Arts from a young age. Many parents may frown upon reading this, but the brutal truth is that the

sooner they learn them, the better they will be able to defend themselves should some of the former members of the Order of the Phoenix attack them, for we all know how vicious, vindictive and cruel they are. Don't we all want to see our children safe and sound? That's exactly what the Dark Lord wants, and he has done all this for their sake.

We shall never thank him enough.

-oOoOoOoOo-

Harry was revolted, thoroughly revolted. He had spent the last couple of hours extracting information from the Death Eater he had captured at Grimmauld Place, and he believed his stomach would never be the same again, the number of hideous acts he had learnt of from the boy, Alain Devreux. The Death Eater, if he could be called that, for he was so junior if not in their ways then in their ranks, had blurted out every single thing he knew about Voldemort and his side and had confessed every single crime he had committed in his twenty years of life. He may not have held a high position in the Dark Army, but he was certainly as cruel and barbaric as Bellatrix. He had told him under the influence of Veritaserum that he had committed his first crime at the age of fourteen, when he had raped and then murdered one of his classmates, who, in his opinion, had deserved what she got for being too beautiful and seductive, with her blue eyes, red hair and stunning body. Harry couldn't stop the anger boiling inside him, he wanted nothing more than to lash out at him, the image of Ginny being forced to do things he had never imagined possible running wildly through his brain. But the Death Eater remained blissfully oblivious to Harry's anger, and continued regaling him with tales about all the heinous acts he had done, pride radiating from his grey eyes; from rape to disembowelment, from murder to torture, from beheading to throttling.

But his thorough interrogation had given him no answers. The boy hadn't said anything that came new to him, save for a few minor facts.

Firstly, he had learnt that Sirius didn't own Grimmauld Place anymore; when his mother had passed away, Sirius had been forced to give all the Black fortune and properties to the Lestranges, and Bellatrix had turned the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black into her hiding place until Voldemort resurrected, then she had destined it to become a place for new recruits, like Alain Devreux.

When he asked about the so-called "Unmentionables", he had been told that they were Voldemort's elite, a group composed by five all-time feared Death Eaters. No-one but Voldemort knew their true identities, no-one knew where they came from, the only well known fact was that they were the highest in the ranks, they were said to be nearly as skilled as Voldemort and as equally deadly as Riddle himself. Devreux didn't actually know the codenames of the five of them, he only knew two of them: Ares and Aphrodite. He had also told Harry that they were his source of inspiration, that whenever he killed, he thought how would any of the five do it, and that he did his best to live up to their standards so that he could one day be like one of them. It scared Harry to no end the knowledge that there were five people higher up than Bellatrix, who had simply been the cruellest woman to ever walk this Earth.

But when Devreux started talking about his dreams and aspirations, mingling it with half-truths, Harry knew that he had to draw a line and end the questioning before he got sick. If you had asked Harry what he felt about giving someone the Draught of Living Death before having interrogated Devreux, he would have said that he would never ever do that in a thousand years, but after having heard all of what the Death Eater had planned to do with Muggles, Muggleborn people and women, Harry actually felt some cold pleasure when he poured the potion into Devreux throat. He didn't kill him, but at least the Death Eater wouldn't escape to commit more atrocities unless given an antidote, and seeing that Harry's house was under the Fidelius, the chances seemed pretty slim.

He locked Devreux in a warded room and then proceeded to have a

drink. He uncorked his bottle of butterbeer quite roughly and took a rather large sip, wiping the corner of his mouth with his right forearm afterwards. He was disgusted, he was angry.

He plopped down onto a couch and tried to relax, taking deep breaths. He knew that if he got worked up, there was the possibility that his magic would uncoil and lash out, and the consequences wouldn't be pretty. He could feel the muscles contracting in his body, aching to vent off some anger and frustration, but he couldn't do that. Instead, he focused on his next task: finishing the phoenix form and searching for allies.

He had to go to Hogwarts the following day; if not to find allies then to extract Ravenclaw's diadem. He wondered whether he could find McGonagall and Hagrid there, or if they could tell him what had happened to his parents and godfather, where were they were. He was extremely eager to meet them, but he was quite apprehensive too. Would they find him disappointing? Twisted? He didn't know, but he ached to know at least where they could be and whether they still wanted their son back.

'Come on Harry,' he whispered, the reflected glower in his face, 'concentrate; you can do it.'

If only he had been more aware of the date, he might have realised that that day was Hallowe'en, and every Hallowe'en night, a red-haired woman came out of her hidden location to secretly put flowers on the tomb of her deceased son.

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Friday, 1st of January 1993

A NEW ORDER: LORD BRITAIN

By Justina Jugson

What would you give to a man – a deity – that has given all to his country and asked nothing in return? What could you give to a man who does everything out of the good of his heart, in a pure selfless and altruistic way? Many of us having been feeling for the longest time that we didn't acknowledge His Excellency the Dark Lord as we should, but given the fact that he wanted no Order of Merlin, no money, no power over the Wizengamot – he wanted nothing, what could we possibly ever do to thank him properly?

Fortunately, our current Minister for Magic Barty Crouch Junior has concocted the perfect idea. Seeing as the Dark Lord has basically carried out every single successful plan to improve the state of our ascending country, the Minister - and by extension the Ministry – has deemed it appropriate to set a position of power above his own: Lord Britain.

The newest Lord Britain would actively have the three powers in his hands: executive, legislative and judiciary. In any other man's hands, this decision would equal disorder, corruption and the destruction of a country; but in Lord Britain's hands, it will mean nothing else but the progress and development of our glorious nation, a country to be feared and envied by the rest of the world, a place where balance and equity exists, and all because of one extraordinary man, one patriot, a freedom-fighter: His Excellency Lord Britain.

-oOoOoOoOo-

The first of November that year dawned chilly and unpleasant, the fog hiding the landscape ahead, the wind blowing ferociously around. It was the kind of day that should be spent in bed, with a fire lit by the chimney and a steamy cup of hot chocolate in one's hands, reading a book or simply doing nothing at all, only resting and relaxing.

But for Harry Potter, the resident hero in that forsaken world, that day meant the beginning of the end of the war, either for life or death, for victory or defeat. That day he would start building up the new army, a group of people who weren't afraid to die, if only they could gain back their old lives and freedom, people who, united by one person, would fight till their last breath to rid this world of Voldemort and his followers. And so he marched on that November morning towards the place he thought he would find his first allies at: Hogwarts.

Under his Invisibility Cloak, he walked from Hogsmeade to Hogwarts. He refused to call his old school "Slytherin School", if he did it was as if Voldemort had won another battle; and no matter how much of a travesty his former school looked like on that day, it would still be Hoggy Warty Hogwarts for him.

He was weighing his options, thinking which way would be best for breaking into the castle and going unnoticed when a sudden noise caught his attention, like a door creaking open. Quickly he drew his wand and turned to his right. At first, he didn't notice anything different, but then, through narrowed eyes, he could see someone at Hagrid's hut, someone that wasn't the old Keeper of Hogwarts' grounds. Harry started feeling angry at the stranger, murderous at the possibility that something had happened to his old and gigantic friend. The unknown person was a male, middle-aged and tall, if his eyes didn't deceive him, sitting on the front steps of Hagrid's house. He looked weird, he was swaying and kept ruffling his dark hair, as if he was trying to shake off dizziness. Harry decided to get closer to the man, to see who had replaced Hagrid in his gamekeeping duties; as quietly and carefully as he could he walked down to the messy hut.

He could hear the man sobbing and muttering incoherently as he buried his head in his arms, and all of his previous anger towards the stranger vanished in that spot. He didn't know why, but he felt as if that anguished person was someone who didn't want to be there, someone who had suffered a great deal and had nothing left to live

for. He knew that that broken man was a friend, an ally.

He stepped on a branch and stopped dead in his tracks, holding his breath, his heart beating madly against his chest. But the man hadn't noticed him, so lost was he in his own world of grief and despair.

‘I'm sorry son... I'm so sorry,’ he whimpered.

Harry realised that the man was drunk, heavily drunk, and by the sound of what he was saying, he had lost his son in the war.

‘Damn you, Voldemort. Damn you!’ he cursed wildly.

Harry lifted his Invisibility Cloak and crouched down before the sobbing wizard. It was risky, but he felt reckless and lucky, so he extended his arm and lifted the wizard's chin gingerly.

Harry gasped.

For the first time in his life, Harry looked straight into the hazel and broken eyes of his father.

-oOoOoOoOo-

DISCLAIMER:

Uni's getting more and more difficult and today I've spent the whole day at the hospital. I'm now due to listen to patients who have a several mental disorders, so I grab my notepad and the list of patients and walk to the door. I open it and find a large queue of people waiting to be treated. I sigh, wondering if I'll make it back home before 2020.

‘Okay, so the next person is Mr Riddle. Mr Riddle, please do come

in,' I say absent-mindedly and walk to the chair next, wondering where the blazes the doctor in charge is. Mr Riddle comes in and my eyes bulge out of my sockets. I don't dare to believe it, so I look at his medical chart.

Patient's Medical Number: 666

Patient's Name: Tom Marvolo Riddle

Patient's Mental Disease: he thinks he is being possessed by some malevolent spirit that forces him to do evil things. When his insanity takes over, he calls himself Lord Voldemort and wants people to fear him and address him as You-Know-Who or He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. When he talks, he fits in between words and sentences nonsense. If not, most of the time he is quite a nice chap, although a bit weird when it comes to his eating habits (his favourite meal is roasted snake), and hobbies (killing bumblebees).
Diagnose: Potter-itis.

'Oh god, oh dear sweet Merlin, he's going to kill me,' I mutter, jerking my legs madly.

'Oh no dear, Avada. I can assure you that Kedavra I mean no Crucio,' he says softly, grinning at me. Is it me, the light, the stress or have his eyes briefly changed to red?

I grimace. 'Er, well, that's good,' I say stupidly. 'So, how are you feeling today, Mr Riddle?'

'Oh please, call me Tommy. I couldn't bear sectumsempra if a charming young lady like yourself levicorpus talked to me so formally' he says, winking at me.

Okay, enough is enough. I get up angrily and start yelling. 'Alright! You've had your fun – now stop with your bloody joke! This isn't funny! First you send Gollum to me and now Voldemort! He's a figment of JKR's imagination, not a real person! Stop it already!' I scream at the top of my lungs, kicking the nearest table to emphasise my anger.

Riddle looks at me patronisingly. 'Dear, maybe you should be hospitalised, too, serpensortia.'

I slap my forehead. This can't be happening to me.

-oOoOoOoOo-

A/N: done!!! Do tell me what you thought about it won't you? Pretty long chapter isn't it? So what did you think?

Cheers

Vermouth

Member of the Siriusan Order

(REVISED by my seriously awesome beta Hasufel: 08/06/2008)

Chapter Seven

The Long Road to Hell

Harry couldn't help staring hungrily at his father, the man of whom many had sung their praises and the object of Snape's hatred; the man he had heard so much about but never met; the man who gave his life to protect his wife and only son, completely aware that he wasn't going to make it out of that nightmare alive. He was confused, he both wanted to run and never come back again and, at the same time, he wanted to be nowhere else. His heart was beating madly against his chest, he felt as if his lungs had collapsed, adrenaline running wildly through his veins; he couldn't get his brain to function properly, he could only manage to stare avidly at the face of James Potter.

He had seen him in photos, in a Pensieve, in the Mirror of Erised, in a non-living form brought back with the Resurrection Stone and as an echo of his previous self; but he now fully appreciated why people said he was just like his father. It was as if someone had decided to make a copy of Harry, plus a few lines on his face and hazel eyes. He realised sadly that his father bore the same expression Harry always had: the expression of someone who had lost too much in his life to be able to be at peace.

He didn't look at all like the happy man he'd seen in photos at his wedding, arm in arm with his glowing mother, happiness and laughter on his face. He was so different from the arrogant fifteen year-old that had once played a cruel prank on another boy at school, putting on a show just because his best friend was bored, smirking at his victim. He had nothing to do with Prongs, so tall and majestic, blinding everyone with its strong power and light. No, the man before him was an echo of James Potter. He was scruffy; his hair messier than ever, leaves and dirt sprinkling the jet-black and greying hair. His robes were filthy, torn and something that resembled Dudley's old hand-me-downs, certainly something that he would have never

expected his father, rich and conceited since his early childhood, to wear. His skin was tanned and lined, as if he had been a man with a fair complexion a long time ago but had spent too much time under the sun. He was very thin, merely skin and bones, and his hands were like long spiders, his knuckles filthy with clotted blood and earth.

‘Harry?’ he asked, his voice raspy.

His voice was so soft, so torn, so anguished and yet so much like his own, it broke Harry’s heart.

‘Yes, it’s me – dad,’ he whispered brokenly, the word sounded so foreign, so weird coming from him.

His father’s eyes gleamed with unshed tears and a sob escaped his throat. ‘Are you real?’ he asked, as if he feared nothing more than his own and cruel imagination, as if he thought his mind was playing a trick on him, giving him what he desired the most only to take it away a second later.

‘Yes, dad,’ he answered, guessing that, like him, his father thought it was too good to be real, to have a part of his family, something he had been denied for all of his life.

James raised one of his arms cautiously, as if the effort to do so was far too great, and Harry watched in fascination as his father’s hand went to touch his face, getting closer inch by inch, the long and dirty fingers trembling. In slow motion, he felt the tips of his fingers contacting his cheek, and he closed his eyes, breathing deeply, afraid to break down as his father’s fingers flexed and his palm cupped his face. His father’s touch was rough and coarse, as if his hand was made of wood and splinters, making him wince slightly. But

it was so warm, so comforting, so familiar that Harry couldn't help the contented sigh that escaped his lips. His head was pushed backwards slightly and he opened his eyes when he noticed that his father had taken his face into both of his dirty hands, tears rolling freely down both of their cheeks.

A lump seemed to have formed in Harry's throat, so big and heavy it barely allowed him to breathe. He watched in wonderment as his father's hands explored his face, the rough skin scratchy against his own. He couldn't stand being static and he threw himself into his father's arms, clinging onto him for dear life, inhaling the mixture of alcohol, sweat and dirt that came from his progenitor. A feeling of safety and childish bliss swept over him, angst and relief cascading through his body, making him shiver unwillingly. For a few minutes, he felt like that unloved little boy in a cupboard again, dreaming about a long-lost relative that would take him away from the Dursleys, someone that would hold him tight when he had a nightmare, when he cried, someone that would kiss his wounds and scratches away like he had seen Aunt Petunia do with his cousin Dudley... But as his father held him to his bony chest, Harry's face buried in his neck, delighting in the soothing circular patterns the calloused hands were doing on his back, he realised that it wasn't a desperate fantasy of his anymore... it was real...

‘Am I dead?’ James whispered.

Harry tore himself away from his father's embrace, startled by that question. ‘No dad,’ he said, his eyes bloodshot, ‘you are just dead drunk,’ he added with a small smile.

James choked back a laugh and clumsily ruffled Harry's already messy hair. ‘How is this possible? Am I hallucinating? Because it hurts, Harry... it hurts to see you like this, as if you were alive – knowing that you were killed – having buried you...’ he sobbed, burying his head once again in his hands, starting to mutter

incoherently once more.

Harry fought back the tears, trying to steady his uneven breathing, shaking slightly. 'I'm here to help you,' he said, surrounding his father's middle with his arms and hoisting him to his feet, alarmed at how light he seemed to him, pulling one of his arms over his shoulders, letting him lean on his body, and kicking the door of Hagrid's hut open.

'But how will you help me, Harry? You are dead! And I can't – stand – seeing you... it's too much...' James sobbed, as Harry placed him in an unfamiliar armchair next to the sink.

Harry pursed his lips, trying to keep his cries in his throat, making an inhuman effort not to let his pain show. 'You won't see me, dad. But trust me, please – you'll get help. Trust me,' he begged, covering James with a couple of blankets that were on top of the basin; waving his hand, he cast a Warming Charm on them.

He watched for a few minutes as his father went into a peaceful slumber, his chest rising and descending evenly, mesmerised by the sight. He couldn't help but wonder what his father was doing at Hogwarts, well - Slytherin School. What had happened to Hagrid? He asked himself as he slumped on the floor, never tearing his eyes away from his father's figure. And where was his mother? He had been so overwhelmed by his father's presence he hadn't had the time to ask.

He took in his surroundings, noticing the differences between this cabin and Hagrid's old hut. While his half-giant friend had packed his house with different sorts of trinkets, tea sets and any animal (injured, illegal or both) he could lay his massive hands on; this cabin would be fit for a messy and disorganised bachelor, a place so filthy and messy it would drive Hermione crazy. There were discarded and empty bottles of Firewhiskey all over the floor, a faint whiff

penetrating his nostrils; the sink had a pile of dirty and mossy plates, the mere sight of it making Harry's stomach churn unpleasantly. The windows were so dirty they gave the impression the weather was permanently chilly and foggy; the atmosphere inside the cabin was damp and derelict, filling Harry's heart with a sudden angst.

He groaned. He would have to postpone breaking into the school, he just didn't think he'd be able to pull it off, seeing how emotionally unstable he was at the moment. He would come again, in the evening probably; but he would come with his Unspeakable robes. Seeing the effect he had had on his father, he didn't trust himself to come as he was... His own father couldn't stand the sight of him... Shaking his head, he got to his feet and walked towards the bathroom to clear his face with some cold water.

But as soon as he opened the door and walked in, he realised he wasn't alone.

There was another man – another drunken man - inside the minuscule bathroom, sitting on the toilet, singing in an undertone some melody he didn't recognise, his head banging against the cold wall behind him, his matted and filthy hair covering what was once a handsome face.

The last time he had seen him alive, it had nearly killed him, watching him in slow motion as he disappeared through the Veil and into the Realm of the Dead...

His godfather, Sirius Black.

Harry wanted to get on the floor on bended knees and ask for forgiveness, to apologise for the stupidity and recklessness that got Sirius killed; but he knew he couldn't - this Sirius hadn't fallen through the Veil, this Sirius hadn't been in Azkaban, this Sirius had never had any relationship with Harry since he had been murdered when he was fifteen months old. Instead, he approached his godfather and

knelt in front of him.

‘Sirius?’

His godfather opened his eyes slowly. Harry gasped – they were so similar to his counterpart’s eyes: haunted, lost, grieved beyond belief... If he hadn’t seen his father, he might’ve believed the Sirius he knew was before him

‘Harry?’ he croaked, staring avidly at him. ‘Is that you? Have I come back from the Veil?’

Harry’s eyes nearly popped out of their sockets. ‘What?’ he sputtered. Did Sirius remember him?

‘Last time I saw you, ‘twas at the Department of Mysteries – the Death Chamber. I fell through the Veil... Haven’t dreamed of you in a couple of years, not since that nightmare...’

Then it dawned on Harry. Sirius didn’t remember him per se; he had caught some glimpses of his other life and thought it was all a dream... But the dreams had stopped when he died... It all fit, it all made sense. Then he suddenly remembered what Hermione had once told him, that Professor Flitwick had been having terrible nightmares recently until he dreamed of his death, and then it had all come to a halt. Flitwick had seen a bit of his other life, but he was now dead in this world... His cheery Charms instructor had seen his own death but felt completely detached from it... It was all so wrong...

‘So watcha doin’ here, Harry? What happened to dear cousin Bella? If this is a dream, then I want you to tell me she’s a Squib or

summat,' he slurred, snapping Harry out of his musings.

'Er, what? Oh, no – Bellatrix is dead. Killed by Molly Weasley,' he answered, thinking that if Sirius believed this meeting to be nothing else but a figment of his imagination, he might as well tell him some truths.

'Yay! Way to go, Molly-moo!' Sirius cheered, pumping his fists up in the air. 'And what 'bout Uncle Voldy? Got his comeuppance?'

Harry arched an eyebrow. For someone who hadn't been in Azkaban, he sure sounded insane. But then again, he thought that maybe he didn't have too much happiness in his life, and every little cheerful thing made him go over-the-top. 'Yes, Voldemort is dead. Did him in myself.'

Sirius ruffled his hair. 'Atta boy! I knew you had it in you!' he said fondly. 'Can't give us a hand here, can you; teach us some moves against the old coot?'

He smiled. 'That's what I'm here for, Padfoot.'

'What?' he asked intelligently. 'Since you are dead you can see the future or what?'

'Soon,' Harry started, trying to use all of his acting skills, 'a man will come. He will have a tattoo on his arm – no, not the Dark Mark,' he added hastily when he saw the disgust on Sirius face, 'it's another one: it has a lion, a phoenix and a basilisk. He's got nothing to do with Voldemort apart from the fact that he hates him to death.'

'Good boy,' said Sirius randomly.

‘Er, yes. Anyway, he will be completely cloaked. Don’t ask him to remove his robes, don’t ask him to reveal his identity – he will do it himself in due time. Ally yourself with him, he will help you; believe in him. Gather up all of those that you have complete trust in, because we are going to put up a fight against Voldemort.’

‘You are serious, aren’t you?’ he asked softly, suddenly looking much more sober and like the Sirius he knew than ever.

Harry sighed. ‘I am completely serious. I don’t care if there aren’t many people in the group, the numbers will increase. Just do it. This man will come to help you – trust him,’ he said in a pleading voice.

Sirius searched his eyes. ‘Alright, Harry. I will. What’s his name?’

The question shocked Harry, he hadn’t thought of that. He couldn’t tell him his name, it would be a tad suspicious. He couldn’t use his middle name either, since it was his father’s first name, it would just be too confusing. And of course, the hyphenated names like the Boy-Who-Lived, Man-Who-Conquered or the Chosen One sounded positively ridiculous.

‘Call him “Gryffindor”, at least for the moment,’ he said, thinking that under that alias no-one would guess his identity.

Sirius chuckled appreciatively. ‘Good taste. Isn’t it a bit presumptuous, though?’

Harry smiled bashfully. ‘Well, yeah, maybe. But he’s Gryffindor’s Heir, after all.’

His godfather’s eyebrows shot up so high that Harry thought they had

been wiped off his face. 'Oh, really? Good for him! Let's kick some snake-arse!' he said jovially.

Harry laughed freely. It was good to see that part of his godfather; immature, childish, but so refreshing. 'That you'll do, Sirius. Now come on, let's get you out of this bathroom,' he said, heaving his godfather to his feet.

He dragged a still drunken Sirius to the bed in the main room. He frowned at the size of it. It was definitely made for a person, not a half-giant; which meant that Hagrid wasn't at Hogwarts – Slytherin School – anymore. Putting those thoughts aside, he covered an already snoring Sirius with a couple of skimpy blankets and headed to the exit.

He opened the door carefully, trying to avoid its creaking sound and looked back one last time before leaving. Smiling at the sight of his father and godfather, Harry burst into flames and disappeared.

-oOoOoOoOo-

'Master needs his fourth helpings on every meal; Master is too skinny' said Kreacher, prodding Harry's stomach with a finger to prove his point. 'If Master doesn't eat, Master will look like a nice, sweet chicken.'

Harry laughed loudly; the old elf had a weird but funny sense of humour. Well, he wasn't that sure Kreacher had a sense of humour per se, but some of the things he said were so spontaneous and hilarious that Harry sometimes had to try with all his might not to end up on all fours laughing. Kreacher wasn't as effusive, brave and overzealous as Dobby had been, but Harry couldn't deny that Kreacher had grown on him.

' Alright Kreacher, I'll go and eat something,' he said

good-naturedly.

Kreacher bowed to Harry, with a display of sheer flexibility as his large nose touched the floor and then grabbed Harry's hand, leading him to the kitchen, with an unsuspected strength. Truthfully, Kreacher could be worse than Mrs Weasley, mothering him all the time, making sure he ate vegetables and fruit. He often said that youngsters those days didn't eat healthily, and that that was why many of them looked as if they had a grave case of Spattergroit. He wasn't sure how on earth Kreacher had learnt about teenagers' eating habits, but he supposed that the elderly House-Elf must have heard Molly Weasley complaining about her children's habits many times, and had decided to take a leaf out of her book and chide Harry gently for it.

But, in all honesty, it was very weird having a wrinkly and old House-Elf behaving like a protective mother with him. He wouldn't be surprised if Kreacher started trying to rock him to sleep, singing him a lullaby. He shook his head vigorously, the mere thought was disturbing at best.

'Sit, Master, sit,' Kreacher commanded. Harry did as he was told and unfolded his napkin, placing it on his lap. 'Kreacher made for Master a healthy meal. Kreacher is a good House-Elf and doesn't want his Master to turn into a bony kitty.'

Harry fought back a grin. Ever since he had started showing Kreacher his progress on his Animagus transformations, the elf had started using a wide variety of names and adjectives for his three forms. When he had shown Kreacher his lion body, the elf had inspected him thoroughly, as if looking for fleas on his fur, jabbing him with his fingers and started calling him "itty bitty kitty". Harry was positive Bellatrix had learnt her vocabulary from Kreacher.

When Harry showed him his progress on the almost completed

phoenix form, Kreacher had dubbed him as “chicken”, “turkey” or “pigeon”. But what was most bizarre, was the name he had used for his basilisk form, “Footsie-pootsie”. Harry prayed that name didn’t get out, it wouldn’t do him much good if he transformed into a lethal sixty-foot snake in front of an enemy and someone called him Footsie-pootsie, for Merlin’s sake!

The clatter of cutlery broke his line of thought and Harry’s mouth watered as Kreacher set a huge and juicy steak on a plate before him. He started eating his food as the elf sat on a chair next to him. It had taken sometime for Kreacher to sit with Harry as he ate, saying that it wasn’t appropriate for a House-Elf to sit with his Master, but after a great deal of convincing, Harry had talked him into it, telling him that he greatly enjoyed his company and that he’d be very glad to eat with him. Of course, the ancient elf had been overjoyed and Harry guessed Kreacher was now as fierce and protective of him as Dobby had been.

‘Young Master is troubled, Kreacher sees,’ said the elf while he ate a bit of bread. ‘Master has been edgy since he came back from Hogwarts this morning.’

Harry sighed. Kreacher was too observant sometimes. ‘I met my father, Kreacher; and he said that he couldn’t stand seeing me...’ he admitted grudgingly.

‘If Master allows poor Kreacher, Kreacher thinks that Master’s father thinks you are dead and it hurts him to see what he lost. Brave Regulus’ memory haunts poor Kreacher still.’

He had to admit that Kreacher did make a valid point, but it still wasn’t enough to erase the harm his father had done to him with his words. ‘You are right, Kreacher; but I don’t think I should reveal myself to him the next time I see him. He was drunk this morning, so

he may think that it was either some dream or an alcohol-induced hallucination.'

Kreacher shook his head, his floppy ears creating a gentle breeze. 'He is your family, Master Harry. Kreacher knows kind Master wants to be with his father.'

Harry rubbed his temples tiredly, it annoyed him a bit when his own House-Elf sounded as wise as Hermione. 'I know. I will – eventually. But for the moment I think it best if we don't get emotionally involved,' he reasoned, more to himself than to Kreacher, 'speaking of family – Sirius is alive.'

Kreacher tensed immediately at the news. If Harry hadn't known better, he would have said the elf was back to his muttering and insulting ways, seeing how much he was degrading Sirius. 'You don't have to see him, you can hide whenever he comes here. I will just need you to write on a spare bit of parchment the location of this house so he can come. He is not your master anymore, Kreacher.'

It did upset him to see how much Kreacher hated his godfather, but he knew that no matter how much he tried to convince him of how great Sirius was, it would be to no avail, for Kreacher despised him with everything he had.

'Kreacher?' Harry asked gingerly.

'Yes, Master Harry?'

'There's something I wanted to tell you,' he said cautiously. 'Do you remember the locket Regulus gave his life for?' he inquired, feeling uneasy as the elf's skin went green, tinged with a couple of yellowish patches. 'He did the same here and – and I retrieved it from

Grimmauld Place, Mundungus Fletcher never had the chance to steal it here... and, well, I thought you might like to carry out Regulus' final wish; to destroy it,' he finished, hoping that he was right and the elf would appreciate his gesture and make his guilt ebb away. He still remembered the buckets Kreacher had cried when he had told Ron, Harry and Hermione his tale when they stayed at Grimmauld Place the previous year.

Kreacher burst into tears and engulfed Harry in a tight hug, whispering incoherently his gratitude for Harry. Somewhat uncomfortable, not accustomed to this emotional explosion, Harry patted the elf on the back, relieved to see that he had made the correct move when he decided to postpone getting rid of Slytherin's Locket.

'I warn you, Kreacher; the locket contains a piece of Voldemort's soul. He'll tempt you, it won't be easy to get rid of it,' he told him, as he disentangled himself from Kreacher's strong grip. 'You can't wield my sword, so I'll have to get some basilisk venom from my own fangs and then impregnate a knife with it. Are you sure you want to do it?'

'Yes!' he cried energetically, raising his skinny fists and nearly hitting Harry's face. 'Yes, brave and kind Master Harry! You are the best master a House-Elf could wish for!'

Harry grinned. Somehow he knew he had just unwittingly managed to get Kreacher even fonder of him.

The rest of the afternoon and evening passed in a blur. Harry had been practising his Occlumency, his Animagus transformation and studying a bit more. Needless to say, he was quite revolted by some of the things he had read about in some Dark Arts books. He couldn't fathom how some wizards' minds worked, all those procedures, curses and rituals had nearly made him empty his stomach. He

couldn't see the pleasure in hurting someone just for the sake of it. He just couldn't.

He was quite relieved when the first rays of moonshine seeped into his garden. He closed his books and went to take a quick shower, bracing himself to meet Sirius again at Hogwarts, disguised in his Unspeakable robes. He undressed and discarded his clothes on his bed, grabbing his underwear and a clean towel firmly wrapped around his waist.

Too soon for his liking, he was striding purposefully towards Hagrid's hut, hoping to find Sirius there instead of his father. It wasn't that he didn't want to see James, he was dying to, but he thought that it would be for the best if he recruited his godfather first, whom he already knew about, and let him pick his allies. He could only hope there wouldn't be another Pettigrew in their midst.

He knocked on the door of the hut with his knuckles and waited patiently for his welcoming, feeling his stomach doing some unpleasant acrobatics. He heard in no time his godfather's raspy voice and he opened the door swiftly, his robes bellowing and the moon making his green eyes stand out. He entered the hut and saw that Sirius was on all fours, his head hidden inside the cupboard beneath the sink, the characteristic clunking noises informing Harry that his godfather was doing some plumbing.

'Hello, Sirius' he said softly.

'Who's – OW!' he cried, massaging the back of his head after having bumped against the cupboard's frame. 'Blimey,' he said, standing slowly, 'that sure – It's you!' he screamed, clutching his chest and backing against the wall in fright when he caught a glimpse of Harry. 'Kill me quickly - don't toy with me!' he begged.

Harry was spooked. 'Er – what? Why would I want to kill you?'

His godfather's shoulders sagged down in relief. 'You aren't here to kill me?' he asked, breathing widely when Harry shook his head. 'Then what are you here for, Unmentionable?' he inquired, his voice turning in the span of a second from scared to threatening.

'I'm not one of these Unmentionables. What I want is to gather up people who will fight against Voldemort,' he stated and rolled up his left sleeve, where the Mark was.

Sirius gasped. 'May – may I?'

Harry nodded.

Sirius approached him and extended his hand to touch his forearm, where the tattoo gleamed proudly against his skin. 'You are him, aren't you?' he asked almost inaudibly. 'You are the so-called "Gryffindor", aren't you?'

He nodded again.

His godfather sighed, flopping down on an armchair. 'This may sound crazy, but I had some sort of vision about you. My dead godson told me that you were going to come and help us soon. Sounds mental, doesn't it?' he asked, laughing mirthlessly, running a hand through his hair.

Harry put a comforting hand on his shoulder. 'I am going to fight Voldemort and his minions to the death. He's done too much, caused too much grief to be allowed to live. I won't rest until he is six feet under,' he finished fiercely.

His godfather pierced him with his eyes. 'I don't know why, but I believe you,' Sirius answered after a few seconds with a feeble smile.

‘Just tell me what to do.’

‘In one week, at midnight, I’ll come back to this hut. During the following seven days, recruit those who you would trust your life with; we can’t afford any double-crossers. When I come back, I’ll swear an oath to verify my intentions of getting rid of Voldemort and give each and every one of you a dose of Veritaserum, so there will be no doubts of where our loyalties lie. After that, I’ll take you to the Headquarters.’

Sirius had been paying close attention to every word Harry had uttered, nodding in approval from time to time, but at the mention of the Headquarters, Harry was surprised to see him grimacing. ‘Where is it?’

‘It’s in Edinburgh, under the Fidelius Charm. Why?’

His godfather winced. ‘I can’t go any further than Hogsmeade. I’m bound to Hogwarts’ grounds and the village,’ he confessed, rolling up his right sleeve and showing him his forearm.

Harry gasped. Carved into his skin, as if it had been done cruelly with a very sharp knife, was one word:

Disgrace.

Harry could feel his anger flaring and his eyes darkened, the air cracking with his power, the temperature in the cabin dropping drastically in a matter of seconds.

‘I’ll be back in a week. I swear I’ll make Voldemort bleed,’ he said icily, as flames engulfed his body, leaving a stunned and hopeful Sirius behind.

-oOoOoOoOo-

Harry drummed his fingers impatiently on the table, waiting anxiously for the arrival of four people, the first four men and women of the résistance. Dressed in his Unspeakable robes, his tall and lean frame basking in the moonshine, the hilt of his sword reflecting the embers of the roaring fire lit in the chimney, his green orbs shining dangerously from the black hole that was his face, Harry gave the impression of someone not to cross.

The inside of the cabin was dimly lit by a few candles, dwindling by the minute, the burning drops of wax dripping on the wooden surfaces and Harry's breath were the only audible sounds. It was cold, very cold, not even the fire could warm the main room; so cold Harry was tempted to go and find one bottle of whiskey to stabilise his body temperature. Or maybe take a sip of it just to calm his nerves.

There was a faint sound of footsteps outside and Harry stood up, his muscles tense. A feeble knock and the door opened, revealing a smiling Sirius and three faceless people behind him. Harry nodded, feeling awkward as Sirius appeared to be treating him like the rightful owner of the cabin instead of a guest, and the party of five entered, wands at the ready next to their waists. Apparently, none of them were as trusting as Sirius was.

Harry wasn't surprised to see his father among the four of them, but it did hurt him to see the suspicious and distrustful look in his eyes. What did surprise him was the presence of Professor McGonagall and Aberforth Dumbledore. He thought the Death Eaters would have finished the strict Transfiguration Mistress off as soon as they had had the first chance to do so, seeing what a fierce duellist she was and how loyal she had always been to Dumbledore and his cause. Although it was far more shocking to Harry that they had kept Dumbledore's wayward brother alive. Perhaps they found it amusing

to torment Aberforth with his brother's fate: the Great and Good Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, locked up in Azkaban in a dingy cell like a common criminal, surrounded day and night by Dementors, diminishing his force to live with every minute he spent there.

Harry snorted inwardly. Toying with the victims and parading their victories would be the Dark Army's undoing. He would see to that.

‘Er, right, so we know what we are all here for,’ Sirius began talking, somewhat uncomfortable, ‘so shall we -’

‘How do you know you can trust him?’ asked James hotly, crossing his arms, a flicker of violence flashing in his eyes. ‘How do you know he's not one of them, waiting for us to make this mistake and kill us off, finally? Get rid of the two last disgraces? And don't tell me it's one of your freaky dreams where my dead son talks to you!’

Sirius sighed, flopping down on a couch, running a hand through his long mane. ‘James, please. We have already discussed this. If Aberforth and Professor McGonagall are -’

‘I don't give a flying fuck if they are all for it! I lost a son to Voldemort! I haven't seen my wife in six years! I will not leave Julian fatherless! What the hell have you lost?’

Harry jumped in surprise. He had a brother?

‘Enough!’ McGonagall cried, her nostrils flaring dangerously. ‘This is not the place to have some childish spat! Either you both behave like the adults you are supposed to be or I shall have to remove you from this meeting!’

Harry had been watching the exchange with mixed feelings. For one, he had been extremely hurt by his own father. He knew he couldn't honestly fault him, he had after all buried his first child; but it still tore his heart to see that Sirius was warmer towards him, that McGonagall and Aberforth were more inclined to form an allegiance with him than his own father. For two, he was extremely uncomfortable with the subject of his mother. Where was she? It seemed as if she had gone into hiding a long time ago, but his father didn't know where she was. But it could be worse, she could have been kidnapped, she could have been murdered without his father's knowledge... The mere thought of that possibility made Harry's heart constrict painfully in his chest. Finally, the simple thought of having a brother was so overwhelming Harry couldn't understand all the joy that invaded him; it was foreign, so weird to think about a sibling, and yet so wonderful...

'James,' Sirius whispered, 'I have never lost a son, I have never been married... I have never had a family until I was eleven... But I have lost a godson; I don't know where two of my best friends are... And now I'm feeling as if I was losing the only friend I have...'

His voice was so broken, so defeated, that it took all of Harry's willpower not to approach his godfather and reveal his true identity at that moment. Instead, he decided to direct his anger at his father, the bully he had seen in Snape's pensieve more alive than ever.

'Leave it! If we argue between ourselves, there's no way we are going to be able to fight against Voldemort!' he stated fiercely, happy to see that he had left them all quite stunned with his words. 'One great man once said,' he added, smiling reminiscently, 'that Voldemort's ability to spread mistrust was too great, and that we could only fight it back with equal trust and friendship.'

Aberforth Dumbledore narrowed his eyes at Harry. 'You knew my brother?'

Harry swore inwardly. Great speech, sure, but Aberforth was sure to recognise his own brother's twisted and brilliant words. 'Yes I did,' he answered, not daring to say anything else lest they started focusing more on his true identity rather than the fight against Voldemort. 'And he was right, you know?' he said rhetorically.

Extracting his wand from his robes, ignoring the gasps at the sight of its red and gleaming colour, he pointed it at his face and drew breath sharply. 'I, the Heir of Gryffindor, pledge my life and magic to destroy Voldemort and his army,' he said in a clear voice, as a beam of magic surrounded him.

Lowering his wand, he glanced around and smirked at the blank faces of his companions, all of them completely flummoxed except for Sirius, who was sitting on the bed, his elbows resting on his legs, a small smile playing on his lips, as if he had been expecting what Harry had done and welcomed his actions.

'Well,' said McGonagall, 'that settles it. We now know you are on our side.'

Harry nodded, smiling at the strict teacher, as she offered herself to be the first to be submitted to Veritaserum. It was a relief to know that some things stayed the same no matter where he was. The questioning, to Harry's great relief, proceeded without any further interruptions and disagreements other than James's occasional snarky comments. Thankfully, everyone's identity and loyalties were true, so Harry rummaged through his robes and gave each a note to include them in the Fidelius.

'Not here,' he hissed at his father, 'wait till we get there.'

‘No, it’s not that,’ said James, ‘it’s just that we can’t go any further than Hogsmeade.’

Harry blinked. ‘What?’

Sirius winced, rolling his left sleeve, showing him again his skin with the word Disgrace written on it. ‘It’s this hideous mark; we are bound to be here. Anywhere further than Hogsmeade would instantly kill us.’

‘You jest!’ he exclaimed.

‘Where have you been not to know this?’ Aberforth asked, rolling his sleeve too, Half-blood written on his forearm. ‘Everyone is given a status, everyone carries a mark. Most of us are bound to a place; going any further would make us drop dead.’

Harry slumped down on a chair, his legs trembling. The world was simply upside down. There had been a blood status in his place, but it had never gone that far...

‘So you are saying that you can’t go anywhere, basically. No battles, no Headquarters, no nothing.’

Sirius grimaced and nodded. ‘We can’t use my hut, either. I was able to get the current Headmaster, Thorfinn Rowle, dead drunk tonight, so I could erase the recording devices he has set in here.’

Harry gaped at him, remembering perfectly well who Thorfinn Rowle was. ‘That blond idiot is the Headmaster?’

‘Of course he is,’ Aberforth said, giving Harry a funny look, ‘it’s his

third year in charge of the school. Where the blazes have you been?’

Harry waved a hand noncommittally. ‘Never mind that, now. So is there some place inside Hogwarts that isn’t under surveillance? Because I’m guessing that all of your quarters are being watched, right?’

‘The Quidditch Pitch?’ Sirius suggested.

‘Anyone can eavesdrop on us there,’ McGonagall dismissed.

‘The Forbidden Forest?’ James piped in.

‘Are you nuts? Don’t want to get eaten by vicious creatures, meself,’ Aberforth spat.

‘The Room of Requirement?’ Harry asked.

‘Watched, too,’ said McGonagall, pacing up and down, ‘the only place I know Rowle doesn’t watch at all is the so-called “Chamber of Secrets”, he believes it to be a myth.’

‘But Voldemort’s the Heir of Slytherin!’ Harry exclaimed. ‘He must’ve told all of his Death Eaters where the entrance is!’

McGonagall arched an eyebrow at him. ‘And how would you know of His heritage?’

Harry flushed red. ‘I have my sources.’

McGonagall's nostrils flared. 'And so do we. Rowle does not know where it is, that I can assure you. While that is indeed good news, the drawback is that we don't know its whereabouts, either.'

Under his robes, Harry smirked. 'Who's the caretaker?'

'I am,' James said. 'Why?'

'You are the caretaker?' Harry sputtered. 'What about Filch?'

'Executed.'

'What?'

'He was a Squib. All Squibs have been executed.'

If Harry hadn't been sitting down he would have fallen to the ground quite harshly. He buried his head in his hands, 'you'll have to explain this to me – all of it... You could say I've been – indisposed – for a long time...' he said with a shaky voice. 'So, if you are the caretaker, would you by any chance know where the Marauder's Map is?'

'How – how do you -?'

'Insignificant details. Do you have it?'

'Yes, I have it right here,' said James, pulling the old bit of

parchment from his cloak and handing it to Harry.

‘I solemnly swear I’m up to no good,’ Harry whispered, oblivious to the disbelieving faces of the two Marauders. He checked the Map – good, he didn’t appear in it. Rowle was in his office, presumably too wasted to do anything else apart from sleeping. Sprout, Sinistra, Hooch, Slughorn, the Carrows, Rookwood, Jugson Junior... What the hell did those Death Eaters teach?

‘Everyone apart from you four is in their private quarters. Let’s move,’ he said, folding the Map and walking to the door.

‘Er, where are we going?’ Sirius asked hesitantly.

‘To the Chamber of Secrets, of course.’

‘Er, what? You know where it is?’ Sirius asked, gobsmacked.

‘Yep; so let’s get a move on,’ Harry answered, his tone stating clearly that the line of questioning ended there. ‘Oh, do you have a couple of roosters?’

‘Er, yes,’ answered Sirius, baffled by his question. ‘Why?’

‘To kill the basilisk inside the Chamber,’ he replied, ignoring the gasps around him.

And so the group of five walked silently towards the school, Harry

leading them while his father and godfather brought up the rear, two silenced roosters in their hands. He couldn't help smiling slightly when he heard James apologising quietly to Sirius for his previous harsh words to him. Maybe things would work out in the end. They approached the castle silently, Harry grimacing at the sight of it, reeking Voldemort's essence, its turrets no longer white and gleaming but dark and treacherous.

Checking the Marauder's Map every five seconds to be sure they wouldn't bump into anyone, Harry marched to the girls' bathroom. He knew he would have to do something about the location of the new headquarters, it was too risky to meet inside the school, with Death Eaters patrolling around; but until he could come up with a solution to his problem, the Chamber of Secrets was the only possible place. Bloody hell did he miss Hermione...

'Where are the ghosts?' he asked, noticing that only the Bloody Baron appeared on the Map, zooming around the Astronomy Tower.

'Banished,' Aberforth answered.

'How the hell do you banish a ghost?'

'Dunno,' said James, shrugging his shoulders, 'Voldemort did it,' he added, venom in his voice.

'Er, why are we in a girls' bathroom? One out of order at that?' Sirius asked, looking around at Moaning Myrtle's old dwelling in puzzlement.

'The entrance is here,' Harry replied shortly, approaching the taps.

Sure enough, the little serpent carved into the faulty water tap was there. Touching it with the tip of his fingers, he pictured the small snake uncoiling and slithering around.

‘Open up’ he hissed.

‘You are a Parselmouth!’ Sirius said accusingly, backing away as the tubes and taps began to reform to take the shape of a pit before their stunned faces.

‘And you are a Black,’ Harry spat, ‘does that make you the same as your dear cousin Bellatrix?’ That was below the belt and Harry knew it; but oftentimes the harsher the words, the quicker the truth was swallowed, and apparently it worked with Sirius, who just nodded slightly, somewhat apologetically.

‘Are you related to Voldemort?’ James asked icily.

Harry sighed. ‘I am not related to him. I’ve been cursed by him, marked by him; everything and everyone I’ve lost was because of him,’ he replied tiredly. ‘Now, I’m going down. Wait around ten seconds to jump before each of you go down. It’s a nasty slope,’ he informed them, before plunging down.

‘Yuck,’ said Harry, wiping the grime off his robes with his wand. ‘It’s just as filthy as I remembered it.’ The same rat skeletons sprawled messily, layers and layers of decaying flesh and bones on the floor, a putrid smell invading his nostrils. He sniffed around; there was a funny whiff in the air, something quite familiar and foreign at the same time.

‘What the hell is this place?’ Aberforth mused.

Harry turned around, surprised, but happy to see all of them safe and sound, without any harm on them other than their disgusted faces.

‘Let’s go. If any of you notice any movement, close your eyes,’ he ordered, his voice harsh and commanding, leaving no doubt as to how serious he was, ‘the basilisk has a killing stare; if you see its eyes, then you snuff it. That’s how Moaning Myrtle died,’ he told them, leading them through the narrow paths that he had once walked through with Ron and Lockhart, desperate to find a missing Ginny.

He sighed. He so missed his friends. He wondered how they were doing. He supposed they’d be looking for possible ways to join him and training day and night. It was a constant bittersweet feeling, the thought of them. He wished he could be with them, playing Quidditch, goofing around; doing those things that any normal teenager, magical or non-magical, would do; but no, as soon as one war ended, he was cursed to get stuck into another one. Catch-bloody-22.

‘Bugger, it’s bloody damn effing huge!’ Aberforth cursed.

Harry turned to his left to see what had made Dumbledore swear so vocally. ‘Ah, the shredded skin of the basilisk,’ he said. ‘Don’t worry, he isn’t here, he must be – shit!’

He then understood the familiar and yet foreign smell, it was the smell of a basilisk! And it was a male, like him! Damn, that made things more complicated. He had been having second thoughts about killing the creature; after all, if he could make the basilisk follow his orders instead of Voldemort’s, then the giant snake would be a great ally. Harry was the King of Snakes, the rest of the slippery and

slithering creatures were bellow him and forced to obey his orders, and so was the Queen of Snakes; but if he encountered another male basilisk, there was no way to guess how it would end. Oh, this wasn't going to be pretty at all.

‘– alright, fine, stay all bloody day long like that, cursing and then leaving us in this merlinforsaken place to wonder what the heck is wrong with you -’

‘I’ll call the basilisk, but he can’t see me under any reason. He can’t,’ Harry told his companions, interrupting James’s rant. ‘If he does, then it’s long odds I’ll win against a one thousand year-old basilisk,’ he said. Sighing tiredly at the perplexed expression on their faces, Harry explained. ‘I’m an Animagus; I’m a basilisk, a male basilisk. If I encounter another male basilisk, what do you think will happen?’

McGonagall was the first to understand what was at risk. ‘You’ll fight for your own supremacy to death. Lead us to the basilisk and we will kill it. Stay away from us as I don’t know the effect the roosters’ cry might have on you,’ she said briskly, in her usual no-nonsense tone. ‘And after this matter is over, I want answers.’

Harry nodded, smiling inwardly. Good old Professor McGonagall, always the same.

‘Open up,’ he hissed as he reached the serpent-guarded gate of the Chamber, the door opening slightly, screeching unpleasantly.

He filled his lungs quickly; an unbidden image of a ghostly pale Ginny on the floor while the figure of Tom Riddle loomed over her came into his mind. Shaking his head to get rid of that memory, he turned around to face the others. ‘See that monkey face on the wall ahead?’

That's Salazar Slytherin; the basilisk will come from Slytherin's mouth as soon as I call him. Are you positive you want to do this?

Aberforth stepped in, the dwindling eerie green lights of the torches giving him an unearthly look. 'There's no need for all of us to be here. One's enough for the job. I'll do it,' he said, taking the roosters from Sirius's grasp.

'Are you sure? I don't like - '

Gulping and bracing himself, Aberforth nodded. 'It's stupid for all of you to be here.'

Harry agreed and turned to face the statue of the founder, recalling what once were Tom Riddle's words. 'Speak to me, Slytherin; Greatest of Hogwarts' Four!'

Once he was out of the Chamber, he cast a Muffliato around them, hoping that Aberforth was lucky enough to get rid of the creature. Pacing up and down, he wondered about the Horcrux he was supposed to destroy that night, to give further proof of his allegiance against Voldemort. Well, he might as well summon Kreacher and do it inside the Chamber.

'It's done,' a voice interrupted him.

Harry spun around, surprised. 'Already?'

Aberforth nodded. 'The cry of the roosters killed the blasted thing instantly. One second the thing was slithering and hissing menacingly, the next it was dead.'

Harry nodded and they all went back inside, another image of his younger version kneeling beside the corpse of the dead creature,

venom spreading quickly through his veins, Ginny pale as death and Riddle – Riddle laughing at him mercilessly...

‘Sweet Merlin!’ McGonagall exclaimed, hand on her chest.

Harry smiled. It sure was an impressive animal, even in death. Convincing the others to milk the corpse to get the venom and then start banishing it, he tried as inconspicuously as possible to call Kreacher, trying to avoid any contact with Sirius.

‘Change of plans, Kreacher. None of them can go home. Can you please bring the locket to destroy it here?’

The House-Elf nodded and vanished; reappearing back not one second later, the infamous locket secure within his firm grip, his scrawny face set in a grim determination. Harry thanked him and both of them started helping the others to clean the mess the Chamber was.

Soon enough, the precious basilisk venom was inside several conjured bottles, the hide folded in numerous heaps to make armours out of it and the corpse nonexistent. Professor McGonagall, as the Transfiguration Mistress she was, started conjuring several couches and armchairs, all of them red.

‘Gryffindor red for Slytherin’s lair. Got to say that I love your sense of humour, McG!’ Sirius cried ecstatically, flopping down on a couch.

McGonagall rolled his eyes at him. ‘I don’t know how many times I’ve told you not to call me “McG”, Sirius -’

‘Not enough, McG!’

‘Alright,’ said Harry, sitting down on an armchair, waiting for the others to get comfortable enough. ‘let’s get started. I need to know -’

‘Wow-ho-ho, wait a second,’ James interrupted. ‘You need to know? You? And what about us? What are we, your slaves or something?’

Harry sighed; bloody hell was his father annoying. ‘No, you are not my slaves. Fine, if you want answers then shoot, but I’ll keep the right not to answer some of them.’

He saw that James was about to retort when McGonagall placed a soothing hand on his arm, shaking her head at him. ‘Fair enough. First question: are you Charlie Weasley?’

Harry blinked. ‘Er – what? No, Of course I’m not!’

Professor McGonagall sighed, rubbing her temples. ‘I thought you might be. He and his sister Ginevra haven’t been seen since the attack on the Burrow. They are thought to be dead, but no-one can know for sure. If you aren’t him, then why are you here? Why now?’

Harry stretched his legs, wondering how was he supposed to both answer truthfully without giving too much information. Maybe it was stupid not to reveal who he was, but he had an odd feeling about it. He needed it to be kept secret, if not for his father and godfather’s security, then for his own sanity.

‘You could say I’ve been indisposed for several years... In time – I suppose – I’ll reveal who I am, but please don’t ask me now – it’s too much... too unbelievable...’

James narrowed his eyes at him. 'Why? What can ever be more unthinkable than having Charlie Weasley back with us?'

Harry snorted. 'Oh, believe me. You wouldn't believe it if I told you who I am. Right, next question.'

'How is it that you can Apparate and Disapparate within Hogwarts' wards?' Sirius asked.

'I'm not Apparating or Disapparating. I'm flaming,' he answered. Smirking slightly at their gobsmacked expressions, he explained further, 'I'm a triple Animagus – yes, Professor, it's possible – and one of my forms is a Phoenix. As a Phoenix, I can flame in an out almost everywhere.'

'How is it that you are a Parselmouth?' James asked.

'I was cursed by Voldemort, and he – unwittingly and unwillingly - passed that trait onto me. It's not a skill I have by birth; it's the result of a failed curse.'

'I still don't trust you,' James said icily. 'Unless you give us further proof -'

'Fine,' Harry spat. 'I'll give you another proof. If Voldemort finds out about this, then I can say bye-bye to my life,' he added dryly, rising from his seat and approaching his House-Elf. Kneeling in front of him, he asked 'are you ready?'

Kreacher nodded. 'Yes, Master Gryffindor.'

Harry stood up again, walking to the nearest couch, his green eyes shining menacingly. 'The locket my House-Elf has is a token I took from Voldemort. It's precious to him because it's one of the six items that make him immortal. Destroying it, I'm destroying a part of his soul.'

Aberforth cursed. 'Voldemort has Horcruxes?'

Nodding grimly, Harry approached Kreacher again, as Aberforth explained to the rest of them what a Horcrux was. Placing the locket on the floor and handing the elf a conjured dagger drenched in basilisk venom, he closed his eyes and thought of Voldemort. Voldemort flying, his red eyes flickering murderously, a sneer pasted on his thin, almost nonexistent lips... a white gleaming wand in his spidery fingers, pointing venomously in the direction of an innocent one year-old green-eyed baby, and a soft, soft hiss...

'Open,' he hissed, his eyes midnight blue.

The glittering green stones that surrounded the slithering 'S' flashed red and the golden doors of the locket swung open, revealing a green iris and a round pupil, the eye of the handsome Tom Riddle.

The eye blinked once. Twice. Thrice. Five times.

'You won't defeat me, Harry Potter,' Riddle snarled in Parseltongue.

'Oh, I will, Riddle. Again.'

A grotesque form of Tom Riddle materialised out of thin air in a swirling pool out of the locket, almost corporeal and yet misty and

undefined, but as scary and intimidating as always.

‘Hoping that another worthless Mudblood will die for you this time? Will you snivel behind one of your betters again, Harry?’ Riddle sneered, his black robes billowing, creating a soft whistle.

‘You are nothing, Riddle, nothing but a lost boy with airs of power and grandeur. You don’t know anything. You have never lived.’

‘Nothing? Nothing, you say?’ Riddle laughed mercilessly, raising his hand at Harry, waving it swiftly, throwing him twenty feet away against the marble walls.

He crashed against the cold stones, his back arching painfully, his temples throbbing. Harry choked, spitting blood. ‘Nothing’ he said.

Too fast for the human eye, Riddle moved next to a kneeling and bloody Harry, his thin fingers caressing what would be his cheek, moving towards his neck. With a smooth turn, he grabbed Harry’s throat and pressed.

‘I am everything, Harry Potter,’ Riddle hissed. ‘You are nothing.’

He couldn’t breathe, and yet his lungs were on fire. Tiny black spots and blurry shapes stood before him, his brain slowly shutting down, a drowsy feeling taking over him, shouting and yelling in the distance... Ron and Hermione smiling at him... Sirius singing “God Rest Ye, Merry Hippogriffs”... Ginny, a hard blazing look in her eyes...

‘AHHHHHHHHHHH! Fight for Master! Fight for brave Regulus’s memory! Destroy the Dark Lord!’

And suddenly Riddle's fingers withdrew from his throat, and Harry was able to breathe freely again. Panting with exertion, he glanced around. There was no Voldemort, it had simply vanished, only a tired but satisfied Kreacher and a worried McGonagall by his side, the three men just staring at him in open disbelief, and a broken locket on the ground, sizzling menacingly in decay.

‘Thanks, Kreacher,’ he panted.

‘Kreacher?’ Sirius asked.

Harry swore, massaging his sore neck. He stood up and flexed his knees, trying to come up with a good excuse for his blunder.

‘Excuse me Mr Black,’ Kreacher piped in, ‘but I am not the House-Elf of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black. I am Master Gryffindor’s elf at the Sanctuary.’

‘That’s my hideout,’ Harry informed, thanking the elf silently for his impeccable timing.

‘Er, alright. You just look like him.’

‘That’s because they are twins,’ Harry lied.

‘Oh, fine, then,’ Sirius said, unconvinced.

‘Alright, now, I want answers,’ Harry demanded.

And Harry got answers, although what he got was something he would have never expected, something that left him so shaky and gobsmacked he didn't know what to do.

In the past six years, clouded by Voldemort's second reign of power, the world had nearly crumbled. With Dumbledore locked up in Azkaban, the Light Army had slowly diminished into nothing more than a bunch of disconnected people and unsuccessful attempts to foil Voldemort's plans.

After the fall of the USSR the Cold War had been put to an end, but as soon as Lord Voldemort's second ascension to power began and several important figures in both the Magical and Muggle world began to disappear oddly again, the tension increased and many nations turned their heads to Britain either accusingly or in favour of their actions; new alliances and new enmities were formed. Germany, weak after being reunited, did not enter the conflict at that point, but Russia, Italy, China and Japan rushed to help Lord Voldemort's demands; while France, the United States, Belgium and Norway were set against Lord Britain from the start. Month by month, year by year, battles broke out in the most recondite of the places on earth, until the population had diminished so severely that there were simply no more soldiers who could fight.

Six years later, the United States, Canada and Australia stood as the only free countries on Earth; France being the last one to surrender in Europe, barely a couple of months previous to Harry's arrival.

‘But you know the French,’ Sirius snorted, ‘if they don't like someone, they'll just put his head on a spike, so I don't reckon it'll last.’ (A/N: je n'ai aucune intention d'insulter les Français, si quelqu'un d'entre vous pense que je n'ai pas été suffisamment polie, je suis tout à fait désolée.)

However, for Britain, the nation of Lord Voldemort, things had turned out much, much worse. In other countries, Voldemort had put his lackeys in charge, but, no matter how vindictive and cruel some Death Eaters might be, they all lacked Voldemort's unmatched cunning and intelligence, they were simply power-hungry and blood-thirsty murderers.

‘Except for Britain of course, where he has one of the slyest Death Eaters acting as Minister,’ Aberforth said scathingly.

‘Wasn't the Minister Barty Crouch Junior?’ asked Harry, fear in his voice.

‘Not anymore. Barty Crouch has been shipped to be the Minister for Magic in Spain. I've heard he's been having problems, with what the many languages there are there and the Northern Muggle terrorists.’

‘So who's the new Minister?’

‘Lucius bloody Malfoy. Gained a lot of sympathy when his son was killed in that freaky explosion a few years ago.’

Harry thought he might faint right then like the classical damsel in distress.

With Malfoy in charge and the Ministry effectively crippled from within, new laws had been passed and approved to satisfy the needs of the celebrated Lord Britain.

And so it began.

It first started with a blood status, information about all witches and wizards compiled in the ample stores of the Ministry. Those who were either Squibs, partly humans or other miscellaneous beings disappeared one day never to reappear again, taken into camps where they were executed.

‘Save for our friend Moony, who’s gone into hiding,’ Sirius piped in.

Harry sighed in relief. If Tonks had been killed in this world, at least Teddy still had his father. Missing, but alive.

After that purge, it moved to the cleansing of the wizarding blood: wiping the Mudbloods off the planet. Under the pretense of delving further into the blood status, the Muggleborns were forced into the Ministry.

On the night of the first of April 1993, hundreds of Muggles were mystified by the powerful green light that seemed to emanate from the depths of London. Some called it “the power of nature”; others called it “the Apocalypses”; but in any case it was clear for all Muggles that it was once-in-a-lifetime event, and many felt elated by the privilege bestowed upon them.

‘I convinced my wife to go into hiding long before that happened,’ James choked, ‘I haven’t seen her again.’

Harry would have thought that Voldemort would have been satisfied enough with the new regime, clean of Mudbloods and half-breeds alike; but it seemed that Lord Britain’s ambition had no limits. Wanting to reward his loyal followers, he had had Malfoy pass another law where every single witch and wizard should register at the Ministry and be given a proper blood status.

‘And so that’s how we got this hideous thing,’ Sirius said, showing his forearm once again, ‘people were separated into Purebloods, Half-bloods, Death Eaters – those who bear the Dark Mark – and Disgraces, meaning, James and I.’

Aberforth and McGonagall showed their Half-blood imprint to Harry, and he shivered. ‘But how does that bind you to a certain place?’

‘Don’t ask me, that’s Voldemort’s doing. Purebloods and Death Eaters are the only ones allowed to go everywhere they want, take up the jobs they want, etcetera.’

‘They thought it funny to put both of us, Sirius and I, former Aurors at Hogwarts – Slytherin School – as the Gamekeeper and caretaker, respectively,’ James snorted.

‘How is it that they haven’t killed you both?’

‘Because we are still Purebloods, and since Gringotts isn’t completely under Voldemort’s power, he needs us alive to take our money away,’ Sirius spat angrily. ‘I suppose he also hopes we’ll hook up with some of those Pureblood trolls and have the offspring that befits our noble blood,’ he added mockingly. To no-one’s surprise, nobody was remotely amused.

‘Us Half-bloods can only take simple jobs like waiters, cleaning personnel and such, save for a few like Professor McGonagall here who are just too good at what they do to be disposed of.’

‘Right,’ Harry said faintly. ‘We need to find a way to bypass this

mark of yours; it's a big hindrance in our way. Bloody hell I need Hermione,' he muttered.

'Hermione? Hermione Granger?' McGonagall questioned, her eyes narrowed at him.

'Er, yes. That's her. Do you know what happened to her?' he asked anxiously.

'No. She fled the country with her family at the end of her first year at Hogwarts.'

Harry sighed. It was all worse than he had expected. He honestly didn't know what to do anymore. What could he possibly do to right a world that was so outrageously wrong? Apart from barging into Voldemort's private quarters and shooting an Avada Kedavra at him, he couldn't come up with anything. To succeed they'd need nothing short of a miracle.

'What about these so-called "Unmentionables"? Who are they?'

The Unmentionables were Voldemort's elite force, the deadliest and cruelest assassins in his ranks. His deadly weapons and his most trusted advisors. Higher than Malfoy or Bellatrix, the five that comprised that group were the only ones who didn't have the Dark Mark nor any distinguishable pattern on their arms. They didn't bow to Voldemort, they were almost his equals.

'Yeah, just like any loving family,' James said derisively. 'I suppose Artemis would say, "what do you want for breakfast, daddy?" and Voldemort would reply, "oh, a couple of Avada Kedavras and ham

sounds fine to me, sweetcheeks,” he jeered.

Number Five was Apollo; swift, arrogant, apparently handsome, with a Wiltshire accent, steely grey eyes and a tendency to brag. He was the kind of murderer who went more for big displays of power and cruelty, rather than accomplishing concrete missions. He was gaudy, rowdy, drank too much Firewhiskey and loved women too much. He was the type of servant that Voldemort would use to spread fear and cripple any hopes of freedom that might sporadically spark within the defeated hearts of the British men and women.

Number Four was small and with green eyes and as introverted as a Death Eater could be. He went by the name of Ares and was said to be as cunning and as sly as Voldemort himself. He helped the Dark Lord planning his moves and attacks, he advised him, plotted and schemed for him. He wasn't too much into murdering and torturing himself, he was too high and important for such mundane matters. He secluded himself in his chambers and devised a new way to increase Voldemort's domination...

Number Three was deranged, completely unhinged. Number Three's codename was Aphrodite, a woman so beautiful it hurt the eyes. Minor drawback, she was totally insane. She only lowered her hood when she was about to kill. She liked toying with her victims and was terribly fond of the Cruciatus Curse, having landed many people in hospitals, their brains turned into mush because of her love for that curse.

Number Two was one that gave children nightmares at night: Hades, the God of Death with eyes as black as his soul. No-one knew exactly what he did with his victims, but once they were taken by him, they were never seen again. Many thought he used them to perform dark rituals and brews, but no-one could confirm that suspicion, because no-one that he had kidnapped had come back alive to tell the tale.

But Number One was the one who sent shivers down Harry's spine: Artemis, Voldemort's favourite and adopted daughter. Cruel, vindictive, deadly, silent. She liked destroying the victims slowly, in a way much crueler than the lunatic Aphrodite would do, and then expose the rest to the open public, send bits and pieces to the families. She was practically infallible; once she had a prey, she hunted it down to the confines of the Earth. Voldemort had graced her with most of his powers, she was the only Parselmouth apart from him, she was Voldemort's Heiress, marked by him on a night so terrible it would be remembered for all times as "The Devil's Night".

'But how can you know all of this?' asked a stunned Harry.

'We have a spy.'

'Snape?'

'No, Snape hasn't been seen since Voldemort rose again,' said Sirius. 'We don't know of the spy's identity, but he must be pretty high. I know that many of the battles the Renagades have won are only because of him – or her.'

'Who?'

'Damn! It's half past seven in the morning,' James cursed.

'What?' McGonagall cried. 'Hurry, if we don't move they'll find out we've been missing.'

And so, the first meeting of the résistance concluded, leaving their leader completely and utterly drained and defeated, hopeless and helpless. Daunted by all of the information he had received, Harry pulled himself up and helped the others exit the Chamber in silence.

‘What we need, is Dumbledore,’ he mumbled to himself.

‘And how are you supposed to get an Albus Dumbledore that isn’t locked up in Azkaban?’ James asked mockingly.

Harry stiffened and then smirked widely. ‘I’ll get back at you in a few days. Stay tuned to the news; hell’s about to break loose,’ he whispered and flamed away.

-oOoOoOoOo-

Night had already fallen, the starless skies above menacing and cold, packed with black clouds that never stopped crying, the wind whipping the trees around ferociously, wet footprints on the apparently endless mud, and a solitary raven flying over a pile of rubble and debris. It was the kind of night that surrounded tales of mystery and ice, when strange things occurred and no-one knew why.

One that cold night, Harry walked alone to the gravestone near Ottery St. Catchpole to lay some flowers on the tombs of his erstwhile family, the Weasleys. He sighed tiredly, it seemed as if lately one of the few things he had managed to do was visit gravestones. He had thought visiting his parents' graves had been difficult, but seeing the cold and cheap marble dedicated to the people who had given him so much in some other faraway place in some other time was nothing but a slow and painful death.

‘I swear I’ll avenge you,’ he whispered to Ron’s tomb. ‘I swear – if

it's the last thing I do...'

And he cried, and cried, and cried for them, for him, for all the people that had suffered in this forsaken land, not knowing what happiness was, oblivious to the sheer joy a friend's smile could cause someone.

'I knew you'd come here today, Harry.'

-oOoOoOoOo-

DISCLAIMER: Am I blond? Nope. Am I rich? That's a definite no. Am I English? Nope, I come from Saturn. Am I JKR? Unless that's a new trendy style, then no. Do I own Harry Potter? Sure, in my dreams.

-oOoOoOoOo-

A/N: yeah, yeah, the disclaimer was lame. Sorry but my brain can't really come up now with funny situation at the moment. Uni exams and all that.

Please do review and make a frantic and hysterical med student happy!

As usual, for any of you that might be interested, there's a link to my Yahoo! Group on my profile page, the address is:

[http://groups dot yahoo dot com forward slash group forward slash Vermouth underscore Fanfiction](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Vermouth_underscore_Fanfiction)

Until next time,

Vermouth

Member of the Siriusan Order

(REVISED by my incredibly brilliant beta Hasufel)

Chapter Eight

How very Slytherin of You, Mr Gryffindor

Harry spun around, quick on his feet, his wand brandished, a fighting stance – only to let his jaw drop open in shock.

Luna Lovegood was standing right before him.

Luna bloody Loony bloody Lovegood. Standing. There. Bloody unfazed, as if she usually met old school friends who happened to have crossed worlds to kill a bloody maniac, get to know his previously dead family and make it out alive. Hunky dory.

‘You should close your mouth, Harry,’ she said, pulling back her dirty blond hair from her round blue eyes, ‘Nimbywombies might attack you if you don’t.’

If Harry had had any previous doubts about her identity, about the person standing before him being an impostor, then they’d been completely erased from his mind as soon as she said that. That was Luna Lovegood alright.

‘But – but – how?’ Harry sputtered intelligently, leaning on the cheap gravestone by his side to support his faltering knees.

Luna sat down on the fresh earth beneath her feet and patted the ground next to her. ‘You should sit down Harry, you look very pale and I would want you to faint here. It must be the Wrackspurts.’

Harry approached her gingerly and bent his knees, landing softly on the cold earth next to Luna, who was simply beaming beatifically at him, contemplating him as if he were some lovely butterfly who had just happened to flutter across her path, gracing her with his mere

presence. Just abso-bloody-lutely corking.

‘I don’t know what’s taken you so long to come here. I expected you to come as soon as you arrived here.’

Harry just stared at her, disbelieving. He could make neither head nor tails about what she was saying. How on earth did Luna’s counterpart learn that he was there? How the hell had she recognised him? He was pretty sure he had been very careful in this world, unlike where he came from, where he used to be so careless, always relying on Hermione to do things immaculately. Those were the days...

‘You should be more cautious, Harry; this is a dreadful place,’ she said calmly, as if she were explaining something very elemental and obvious to a small child. ‘You should’ve asked me something that only Luna Lovegood would know. Well, I’m not the Luna you knew, so I suppose you could call me something else – just not “Tuna”, for Luna and Two; I never liked that fish, packed with Pinigramies – very dangerous creatures, indeed,’ she wheezed, leaving Harry completely baffled. He still wasn’t over the fact Luna was there and had recognised him, let alone understand all the gibberish she’d just delighted him with. He just stared at her, as if he were a very close-minded Muggle that had seen some magic accidentally for the first time.

She paid no attention to his shocked state, as if he wasn’t there with her. Absent-mindedly, she plucked a bunch of grass from the ground and stared at it in wonderment. ‘Daddy would have been very happy to see this. If he were still alive, that is,’ she whispered, as if she were talking to everyone and to no-one at the same time, just absorbed in the handful of grass and earth that lay on the palm of her hand.

‘What?’ Harry sputtered.

Not lifting her gaze from her hand, still looking at it as if it were something precious to her, she opened her mouth, just barely, 'Yes, Daddy was killed two years ago in a raid in Bordeaux,' she said, oddly calm, 'oh, that's where we lived, in France. We had to flee England even before I was due to start my years at Hogwarts.'

Harry's brain was fried, boiled, turned into porridge. It was simply too much information, too many discarded bits of knowledge; seemingly disconnected events that made his head spin way too fast. Nothing made sense anymore, it was all just too random to keep track of. If this Luna spent half of her life in Borgdoh (or however it was said), how was it that she knew him? After all, it couldn't be his Luna, if she had lived in France. And if this wasn't his Luna, how on Merlin's pants did she know him?

'I'm sorry,' he said, it was the only coherent sentence he could come up with right then. It seemed weird and eerie to think that the publisher of the Quibbler, Xenophilius Lovegood, whom he had seen barely a week prior to his coming to the new world, was dead. It was not exactly the same person, true, but considering this Luna apparently knew him, he actually found himself thinking about her as if she were the curious and strange girl he had known since fifth year. But then again, it couldn't be weirder than meeting his dead father, whom he had never known, and your dead godfather, whom he'd seen die. Why couldn't things ever turn out normally for him?

Only this Luna had a terrible scar on her cheek and her eyes weren't quite as dreamy as the other Luna's had been. In fact, Harry thought the oblivious look she was wearing now was a simple façade, a long past memory of the carefree girl she had once been, a long time ago. He may have been fooled by her deception had it not been for the haunted look that crossed her eyes from time to time, as if she was bitter and full of hatred, something that Harry thought impossible of Luna Lovegood. Apparently no-one had remained unscathed by the

constant war in that forsaken world.

‘It’s all right. You didn’t kill him, I won’t kill you. Not sure if I could, anyway,’ she said, completely unaware of the venom her tone leaked, one he had associated with Severus Snape some time ago, one that sent chills down his spine. Bloody hell, just what kind of life had this Luna had?

‘I used to think about the DA when Daddy died, it always made me feel better. I used to think that he was alive, somewhere, and that somewhere I used to be happy having friends,’ she said oddly calm, as if she were talking about something as normal as the weather in Scotland.

At least Harry now knew this was Luna, not someone else, she just had to say those uncomfortable truths like no-one else did. ‘But how is it that you know about the DA? How is it that you know me?’

Luna just looked at him, bewildered. ‘Because I always took my dreams seriously.’

‘Oh. All right,’ he said blankly.

Harry wanted to ask her questions about her life and the situation in general, but he wasn’t too sure if this Luna was stable enough for it. Come to think about it, he wasn’t sure his Luna was sane enough, but at least his Luna had never gone through the trials this one had.

‘It’s alright to ask questions, Harry. It’s nice to have a friend that knows your real name and you don’t have to hide under a mask and a codename when you’re with him. Feels as if I had a life.’

For the third time since he had been with her, Harry knew this was Luna Lovegood alright. 'Did you go to Hogwarts?' he asked, thinking that this was not a terrible question.

She shook her head. 'When Voldemort – yes, I say the name, why wouldn't I? His name's not so impressive: "flight from death", it sounds cowardly to me – so when Voldemort went back to power and Dumbledore was sent to Azkaban, Daddy knew he couldn't stay here because he was a Halfblood. Mum was already dead, which to some extent is good because the law forbids any Pureblood from having children with someone that's not another Pureblood, and the punishment for doing that is death, in the most painful of way. There's actually a hierarchy depending on the purity of your blood, but we'll get to that later,' she explained to him, her voice still and composed, oblivious to Harry's horrified face.

'So Daddy decided that France was the best place to hide, thinking it would take a long time for France to fall, if it did at all. Well, the US would have been better, but they were getting so swamped with refugees that the borders were tightened and became very selective. So we lived in Bordeaux and I went to Beauxbatons. The echoes of war still reached our home, but it wasn't as bad as in England.'

'We managed to live alright for almost one year under the inconspicuous names of Pierre and Anne Dupont, before the situation in France got worse. After Voldemort ruled the British Isles, he went to conquer the rest of Europe, and France is always one of the countries in the spotlight during wartime, along with Germany.'

Harry was listening to her in rapt attention. He briefly thought how different this History class was from the dull Goblin Rebellions he had heard so much of during his classes of History of Magic with the old ghost teacher, Professor Binns. The thought was quickly erased from his mind, though, concentrated as he was on this Luna's words. It

was astounding how little she sounded like the Luna he knew at that precise moment, she was just so out of character. Instead, she sounded much more like Hermione when she went into her teacher-mode than her usual dreamy self. In fact, her voice and face reminded him of an old veteran who has seen too much war.

‘Daddy was getting more and more nervous about the situation, and by the end of my first year at Beauxbatons, I was already being instructed to fight, as were several of my classmates; the ones who had parents who believed the war would break out in France shortly, unlike those who thought that “ze Breeteesh Darg Lohrd” would never manage to make Paris fall.’

Harry sighed unwittingly. For some strange reason, people always thought that bad things only happened to others, and in his opinion politicians shared that thought way too much, ignoring the signs and clues. Maybe that was why the world had fallen to Voldemort’s power in the first place, because he had never been taken seriously until it was too late. He wasn’t too sure about Grindelwald, but he knew that had happened with Hitler’s rise to power. Mankind was stupid.

‘During my second year, things started getting worse. There were attacks everywhere; the Muggles were paranoid because they believed there was some sort of terrorist group that was spreading worldwide. The magical community was starting to feel anxious. Suddenly the war in Britain didn’t seem so far away and so foreign to them. Defence Against the Dark Arts was reinforced at Beauxbatons, and that year my grades started dropping, because my training outside got much stricter and time-demanding. Daddy wasn’t so interested then in trips to Sweden and wit beyond measure. We still defended that Crumple Horned-Snorkacks existed, but we both let it go for some time because we knew it was more important to be alive than to prove to the rest of the world about the Snorkacks’ existence. So I trained, and trained, and trained until I passed out. Daddy didn’t

like to exhaust me like that, but we both agreed it was all for the best. Better to be unconscious for some time than dead.'

Harry started at her in shock. And he thought he had been hard-done-by. The amount of suffering this Luna had gone through seemed like a total waste of what should have been a happy childhood. He then realised how much he missed his Luna, so spontaneous and less troubled. Damn, he missed all of his friends, and it just hit him like a sudden wave. He hunched his shoulders, and wondered sadly when he had started to forget about bringing them to him, when he had been so immersed in this world he had forgotten where he came from.

'Shortly after Britain fell and the attacks in France started escalating, rumours of a group that fought against the Death Eaters that were trying to make France fall began to spread wide around the country. The "Renegades", they were called. Apparently the leader of it is British, but I have never seen him, I only know that his codename is "Dragon", and that's it.'

Harry's ears perked up at this. He had heard about the "Renegades" before, only no-one had told him what they were.

'Dragon recruited few people at first, but soon enough it became a quite impressive army that branched out, forming an organised group with him in the centre, from his leader status to colonels, lieutenants, sergeants, captains and so on. That's why I have never met him, because I am only one more in the Chimera team. But we will get to that later.'

'Of course, the French government was so deep in trouble they made the Renegades look as if they were some elite force from the Ministry, sponsored from within its walls, trained with all the

knowledge the Ministry could provide; built and shaped from the heart of both the Department of Mysteries and the Department of Law Enforcement to protect the innocent French citizens.'

A sudden thought crossed Harry's mind, and he wondered why it seemed that France and England were so different in some ways. 'But didn't Voldemort get massive support from the Purebloods there?'

Luna looked at him funnily. 'Harry, there are only two Pureblood families in France: the De Nemours and the De Belsunce family. And both of them lost many members during the Second World War. They knew that if they sided with Voldemort, sooner or later they would both end up being annihilated by the rest of the French population. And even if they are considered Purebloods, they are not as pure as the British; they do have Muggle blood running through their veins.'

Harry was completely stunned by that fact. 'But how come there are only two families there? Has France always been more tolerant than other countries when it came to blood?'

Luna gave him a shaky laugh. 'No, not at all. People are people everywhere; some might have larger noses or darker skin, but they're all people. The situation is different in France because the country is strategically situated in Europe: just in the middle. The British Isles are somewhat isolated, but France and Germany are just in the middle – so no matter where the conflict started, France was due to participate in it. France has fought more wars than both Germany and England have, either against the British, the Spanish, the German, the Muslims in the Medieval Ages... So many years ago Voldemort could have gained massive support from the French aristocrats, but after the Revolution in 1789, things started changing. The King had been beheaded, the nobility had been slain, and the population had decreased so much the magical community was almost extinct. After that, blood didn't seem as important as preserving our kind. And then there was the First and Second World

War, not counting on the previous and uncountable wars and diseases that had hit France before the Revolution.'

He frowned pensively. 'So you're saying that since France has always been in the middle of everything, the number of people was so ridiculously small, the magical community so threatened to be extinguished, the prejudices were erased?' Harry asked, not sure whether he had understood everything she had told him.

Luna nodded and coughed, shivering slightly. Harry made a move to cast a Warming Charm on her, but she beat him to it. 'So where was I? Oh yes, the Renegades and the Ministry. The Ministry trying to look as if they were doing something against the attacks. The Renegades were more worried about the actual fights and recruiting more members than about stupid Ministry bigotry and lies, so they let it go for a while. It became apparent soon enough that they needed a steadier economical support, though, and that' s when they started asking the Ministry for money if they wanted to keep the farce up.'

'And the Ministry accepted?' Harry asked, shocked.

She laughed hollowly. 'Of course they did. Desperate times, desperate measures, Harry. You have fought your own battles, deadlier than most of us have, but you have never truly lived a real war, you have no idea the kind of corruption there is, even within the "good guys". People just do what they have to do to win, and if that means blackmail, then so be it.'

At that precise instant, Harry felt small and fragile. He then realised he had never been anything else but a soldier in a war fought between Voldemort and Dumbledore. He imagined himself along with his parents, his godfather and his friends as mere white pawns in an enormous and decrepit-looking chess set, where Dumbledore had been the White King and Voldemort the Black King. He may

have defeated the Black King, a simple pawn, but Dumbledore, the mastermind had orchestrated very movement he had made.

He sighed inwardly. Things were going to change. He would not be a pawn, or a bishop – not even a king. He was not going to pull strings and webs; he was just going to do what he had to do.

‘But things started to get very bloody. Families lost their children in war, not knowing that they belonged to the Renegades in most places, and people complained, saying that the Renegades were not effectives, that they were murderers, and the Ministry tried to defend itself by saying that the Renegades had deserted the law. So they only group that fought actively against Voldemort was left without money.’

Harry was disgusted by what he was hearing, but it just sounded so much like something ruthless politicians would do to keep themselves in a position of power.

‘Daddy was a researcher in the group, while I joined the forces after I had completed my fourth year. I shouldn’t have been able to be in battle at that age, but the numbers were gradually decreasing. The Renegades were getting more and more desperate because they thought France was going to fall soon; so they took me in, and I’ve been battling ever since. My first kill was when I was fifteen.’

Harry’s head was spinning. He could barely imagine a place where children fought adults’ wars. He remembered how exasperated he had been when he had been younger and adults had wanted to keep him in the dark for his safety, and although he thought they had all made a mistake by doing so, especially since he always ended up in the middle of the conflict, he could see much better now why adults tried so much to keep him and his friends away from it. War wasn’t a place for children. It wasn’t even a place for adults, but no child

should have to kill mercilessly at that age.

‘I never sat for my exams at Beauxbatons at the end of my sixth year. When Daddy was murdered, I went to live at our headquarters and quit my studies. Learning how to transfigure teapots into mice didn’t sound so practical then. Since then I lived with the rest of my team and some other teams there, studied the skills I needed to survive and fought in battles. I knew you would eventually come here, especially after I dreamed about the defeat of Voldemort in your world and then after having felt the magical impact of your coming here, but I never said anything. No-one would’ve believed me until I saw you.’

Harry gave her a sad smile. She was so different from the Luna he knew. His Luna wouldn’t have cared if people believed her or not, she would’ve defended her insane theories to death, even if the rest of the school laughed at her. But this Luna didn’t. She was still fond of crazy theories, but she basically kept them to herself, like some sort of self-preservation tradition she’d picked up; but she never said anything about it. She wanted to be taken seriously, she wanted to keep surviving. What damned world was this where children fought wars and lost themselves in it?

‘I’m sorry.’

She shrugged her shoulders. ‘As I said, it’s not your fault. I’m just glad you’re here - now the real revolution I’ve been waiting for so long can start. Daddy would have been so happy to see you. He always knew you would come, too. No-one ever listens to their dreams anymore. Just like no-one ever believes in the Crumple-Horned Snorkacks anymore.’

‘Er, right,’ said Harry blankly. ‘Er, do you know who killed your father,

Luna?' he asked tentatively, not knowing whether he should ask that question or not.

A murderous look flashed across her eyes, making her look much more dangerous than he'd ever seen her. 'Not the Death Eater that cast the Unforgivable on him, no; I just know that the order was sent by the Unmentionable Ares, and I'm going to kill him,' she spat venomously, hatred leaking from her voice, freezing Harry's insides.

He really didn't know what to say or what to do. She was both the same and yet so different from the Luna he had known. The quaint Ravenclaw in his world had been brave, but she'd never had to face deathly situations like this Luna had had.

Harry sighed heavily and hugged his legs for warmth, his head resting on the top of his knees. It was getting very late and very cold, and they would soon have to leave that place lest they froze to death, and that was something he didn't want at all and he doubted this Luna, however quaint, would want that either.

It was all very complicated, he thought, as he gazed at the Weasleys' tombs, the cheap marble slowly getting dirty and worn, the remnants of his erstwhile family unkempt and forgotten. He shivered and his shoulders slumped down in defeat. He felt so tired, he only wanted this nightmare to stop and to be a just another boy, with his friends by his side. Hell, he could even say he missed the Dursleys. He only ever wanted to be another boy, he would have never wished for this to happen, to fall again into another war, in another world and almost completely alone. He now had this Luna in this world, one person who knew him, but he felt uneasy and uncomfortable with her around. It wasn't her fault, it was more the fact that she was both someone he knew and someone he had never met.

'You should work with the Renegades. They are some of the few that have not been branded with those hideous blood-status' marks,'

she said, breaking the deafening silence between the two of them.

‘Oh?’ he asked.

‘I said you should work with the Renegades. I think you’d gain a lot from it, and so would we,’ she added, a thoughtful look in her eyes.

Harry furrowed his eyebrows. ‘I’m not so sure about that, Luna. I have several things I should do on my own.’

‘Oh, you mean you have to go and look for Horcruxes still? I thought you would’ve done that by now,’ she said nonchalantly.

He gaped at her, his mouth open wide in shock. ‘How – how the heck do you know about that?’ he sputtered.

She looked at him back as if he had sprouted another head. ‘As I said, I pay attention to my dreams. You should do so, too.’

For a fleeting second, Harry felt as if he had his old batty Professor Trelawney in front of him and had to struggle not to laugh at the thought. Come to think about it, Luna could’ve been a Divination teacher; she was both quite quaint and had a knack for saying surreal things. He reckoned she would be a better instructor than Trelawney had been, or at least her classes would be much more amusing, since he doubted she would predict his imminent death every time she saw him. He still believed Hermione would end up going berserk and drop the subject in an outrageously public way, though.

‘You’d have to get a codename, though; you can’t be known as Harry, if someone was captured and revealed your true name, both

you and your family would be at risk,' she said, managing to snap Harry out of his reverie.

'I'm already known by some as "Gryffindor",' he said in a non-committal manner; he wasn't too sure he liked the idea of trusting an organization he'd never heard about with his life, bearing in mind how much was at risk and how much depended on him. And apart from that, there were four people who'd put their faith in him to help them; he didn't want to fail them.

They could still be allies, though.

'I'm not so sure about that, Harry. You'd have to impress them quite a lot to make the leaders see you as an ally rather than another soldier.'

Harry snorted. Politics again. Yes, he had made the right decision by not wanting to enrol forces. But on the other hand, it seemed as if the Renegades had trained people in their ranks, which would certainly come in handy in a battle against Voldemort and his army, so it would be a very daft thing to reject their help based solely on that reason. No, he may have to defeat Voldemort, but he knew perfectly well that he alone could not do it; he had been too lucky last time...

'Well,' he said, standing up energetically and offering his hand to her, 'Ms. Lovegood, I have a plan,' he finished, smiling at her.

She beamed at him and took his hand, jumping to her feet. 'Excellent, Gryffindor. Now let's go over that plan of yours. Oh, and by the way, from now on, I'm Snorkack.'

-OoOoOoOoO-

‘I’m not too sure about this, Luna,’ Harry said apprehensively.

She rolled her eyes at him. ‘Quit being such a nancy-boy. It was your idea in the first place and a brilliant one; one so – so Slytherin – no-one could ever recognise your work in it,’ she said tiredly. ‘And for the last time – I’m Snorkack.’

Harry sighed. Things were spiralling out of control – or at least out of his control. It seemed as if there were many things about Luna he would never have dreamed of; he could have never pegged her down as the bossy type, like Hermione, but when it came to being ruthless, this Luna was that indeed. In fact, she could be downright scary, flipping from speaking in wild riddles and tales about imaginary creatures and random things to being as cold-hearted as Lucius Malfoy could be. It was unnerving.

He sighed again. Things were so different. She was so different – and it had all been because of the war, because of the relative peace he had known back in his old life. Peace that this word knew nothing of and could never imagine. It had been so long since there hadn’t been daily murders, daily attacks and coups, no-one was sure of what that word meant anymore.

As Ron would say; it sucked, big-time.

‘You know; I wouldn’t want to be your enemy,’ he said resignedly, slumping down on the wet earth.

She laughed mirthlessly. ‘Harry, this is a war and I’m a mere pawn. I’m nothing – nothing – compared to others. And anyway, I don’t think I could ever have come up with this plan, no matter if you were only joking under the influence of Wrackspurts.’

Sometimes Harry felt like a child in front of this Luna – no wait, in

front of Snorkack. She could say the most painfully obvious truths just as the old Luna would do, only without the fancy and far-fetched tales that had got to grow on him. Bloody Merlin, he missed the Crumple-Horned Snorkacks.

He rummaged into the pockets of his robe, extracting from them the miniature of his trunk. Letting it on the floor, he cast a quick Engorgio on it, bringing it back to its normal size. He opened it dejectedly, the foreboding sensation in his stomach increasing by the minute. He really didn't want to do this.

He looked around, his paranoid mind going haywire, checking for possible intruders at all times. If things continued like this, he was going to have a very sore neck the following day. But he knew there was a reason he was behaving like that, so worried and frantic. He knew that they were in his enemy's territory and about to strike such a blow it would take his nemesis a long time to recover from it. If they were caught, he might as well begin to say his prayers, for he was positive he wouldn't come out of it alive – and everything he had done would've been in vain.

Luna – Snorkack – wasn't paying him the slightest attention, so engrossed was she in looking over the maps and plans, her wand stuck in her hair, holding it into a tight knot. She was sprawled over the ground, indifferent to the spider that was creeping up her hand. Biting her nails from time to time, Snorkack seemed to be in her element, plotting and calculating in some lost woods, trees surrounding them, obscuring them from eyesight. She was so comfortable with what she was doing it was uncanny.

Lifting her eyes from the paperwork, she glanced at Harry and grinned at him. 'Ready for it, then?' she said, hoisting herself to her feet and approaching him.

Harry nodded in defeat, opening his trunk and grimacing slightly at the task before him, letting himself find comfort in the warm hand she

had placed on his shoulder.

‘Remember this, Harry: you’re the only one who can do this – I won’t be there to cover your back; but if you do this, not only you will gain the attention of the Renegades, but you’ll strike Voldemort hard,’ she said calmly. If that was meant to soothe him, it didn’t work very well.

A sudden thought crossed through Harry’s mind. Maybe it was just because he was about to do something so risky and so crazy, his mind couldn’t stop coming up with endless bad feelings and drawbacks to the plan; but this time he realised that this thought was a very reasonable one. ‘But wouldn’t it be better if I tried to be as inconspicuous as possible?’ After all, shouldn’t he let Voldemort relax in his throne surrounded by his Death Eaters and let him get lazy until he could strike the last and fatal blow?

Luna grinned at him mischievously. ‘I’d already thought of that, and to be honest, no. Neither Voldemort nor the Death Eaters are lazy at the moment. Not enough time has passed since France fell to make them confident enough about their empire. The Renegades have not been defeated; there are still many people who have not surrendered yet, so neither Voldemort nor his followers can afford to lay back and rest.’

‘But if we succeed –’

‘But if you succeed,’ she interrupted him, her eyes blazing and her voice uncommonly harsh, no inkling of her usual dreamy self in her tone, ‘this will mean the Death Eaters will be nervous. And nervous Death Eaters equals clumsy Death Eaters.’

‘But what about Voldemort?’ he asked. Death Eaters he could

handle, the Renegades could handle them; but Voldemort? The Chief Death Eater was another story. He had unwittingly relied on luck, on Hermione's outstanding brainpower and on Dumbledore's plans last time – even though he had been unaware of half of them – and he knew he couldn't afford to be so foolhardy this time, mainly because for the moment there was no Dumbledore and no Hermione – and everyone runs out of luck at some point or another.

‘Voldemort will simply Crucio all of the Death Eaters for a while and get paranoid. But he won't suspect you; he killed you when you were a baby, after all.’

He simply nodded his head slightly. He didn't know what to say to that since, unfortunately, she was telling the truth. He only wished the truth wasn't like that. He turned to his trunk, the bottom getting muddy because of the wet ground beneath it. Looking at his trunk in what seemed like an unhealthy fascination, he braced himself for what he was about to do.

Luna poked his ribs, snapping him out of his reverie. ‘Oh, alright, alright, I'll get going,’ he mumbled and went inside his trunk.

The rickety staircase that led to an almost perfect copy of the dining room at Potter Manor had never made him feel so queasy. The walls surrounding him, gleaming white seemed to be sending him disapproving looks, for what he was about to do was unworthy of a Potter. He sighed, he really didn't like doing this, but if he got rid of all his uneasiness, he knew it was not only what his side needed, both for strength and a lift of hearts; but it was justice – well, more or less.

That didn't mean he liked it. Somehow, weaving webs and tangling people inside them was neither something he liked nor his forte. But needs must.

He reached the door he searched for, the pit in his stomach growing,

and starting waving his wand, casting the counter-curses to the spells that had warded heavily that one special room inside the trunk. He would never thank Hermione enough for having had taught him so many things about wards and special hexes to keep a place safe. And this one room needed to be safe.

After all, there was a prisoner inside.

He opened the door quickly, his wand at the ready. He didn't think that Alain Devreux, the young Death Eater he had caught infraganti at Grimmauld Place, was about to attack him; but since he didn't know in which mental state he was, having been locked up inside a bare room for quite some time, with only an aggressive and maddened Kreacher to talk to. In all honesty, he had never asked Kreacher to behave like that towards the Death Eater, but it appeared that the elderly House-Elf had decided to be especially nasty to those that not too long ago he would have been very nice to. If Harry had needed any more evidence, that was proof enough to state that Kreacher had lost his marbles.

But Alain Devreux said nothing. He did nothing. After all, he was tied up with a handkerchief in his mouth. He did look at Harry with pure hatred in his eyes, though. Harry sighed. Blimey, Kreacher was nuts.

Without exchanging a single word with the prisoner, he cast a Levitation Charm on him and made him float all the way out of the trunk. Of course, the Death Eater wriggled all the way, and made noises that, had his mouth been free of handkerchiefs, Harry was sure would have been using all the swear words he had ever learnt, both in English and French. Oh, and several death threats, too.

He came out of the trunk, not really bothering to pay attention to the occasional times when the Death Eater's head hit against the staircase, and locked it back as soon as he was out, his face grim, his mood solemn.

Snorkack beamed at him. 'Glad you got him out. We do need our guinea pig. All set?' she asked.

Harry nodded glumly. 'All set. I'm ready whenever you are.'

She fetched a vial inside one of her pockets, all the while whistling some sort of catchy tune. The Death Eater lay on the floor, his eyes wide in fear, and his whole body trembling. Harry knew he wouldn't want to be in his shoes.

Snorkack kneeled beside Devreux, while she uncorked a vial that contained a silvery potion, either purposefully not paying any attention to the Death Eater's whimpers and his struggle to break free, or was simply blissfully unaware of it. She lifted her gaze towards Harry, as if surprised to see him standing there, a grimace on his features, doing nothing. 'Well; what are you waiting for? Get rid of the handkerchief.'

Harry approached the struggling Death Eater gingerly, not really wanting to have any further contact with him – especially since he believed the Death Eater would try to bite him - and very carefully cast a Vanishing Spell on the cloth. He was about to sigh when –

'HELP! HELP! THE RENEGADES -!'

'Silencio!' Harry cried, effectively shutting the screaming Death Eater up. He didn't dare breathe, and neither did Snorkack. Very slowly, both stood up, as quietly as they could and drew their wands, covering their backs. If there was another Death Eater within earshot, they would expect him or her to appear soon. They waited.

And waited.

But no-one came, and Harry let out the breath he didn't know he had

been holding. Merlin, that one stunt could have doomed the mission.

He turned around to give Snorkack a tired smile, only to find one very angry and very dangerous-looking Luna, glaring at the Death Eater in such a way that Harry was positive Devreux wished he had never set foot on English soil. She knelt again and ordered Harry to do the same but on the other side, so they were at each side of Devreux's face.

‘Keep his mouth open, Harry,’ she commanded.

Gingerly, he did as she told him to, careful to put forth enough strength at all times so as not to let Devreux consider even for a moment the thought of snapping his jaws back together while he had his fingers holding it tight; but not too much strength, in case he broke a bone.

‘Where did you get the hair?’ he asked while she poured the liquid into the unwilling Death Eater's mouth.

‘Well, it's obvious. From his office,’ she said, raising his eyebrows at him, surprised; oblivious to the efforts the Death Eater was making so as to not swallow the Polyjuice Potion he'd been force-fed.

‘From his office? After all these years there was still hair there?’ Harry asked bewildered, while checking if Devreux had already started swallowing. Not. Harry sighed. He would have to, in the end.

Snorkack rolled her eyes at him. ‘Not on the floor, you dummy. He had a hidden boudoir that still had some hairbrushes. I'm surprised he wasn't bald. So much hair I got from those brushes that I think I could disguise as him for the rest of my days.’

‘Oh’ Harry said blankly. He tried to keep his mind off some very disturbing images and concentrated on whether Devreux had started swallowing yet.

Not.

Harry puffed angrily at him. Honestly, it was taking a toll on his fingers to hold the mouth steady like that.

‘Right,’ he said, ‘so while this git decides whether or not he’s going to swallow the bloody Polyjuice Potion, let’s go over the plan once again,’ he muttered. He knew the plan well enough. They’d gone over it a hundred times already, but at least that way he wouldn’t focus as much on Devreux clawing teeth.

‘All right. North or West?’

‘North.’

‘Floor?’

‘Seventh.’

‘Number?’

‘Seven.’

‘Letter?’

‘G.’

‘What’s inside?’

‘On the left, there’s a small bed, on the right there’s a tiny toilet. On the background there’s nothing.’

‘What can you never do while you are inside?’

‘Use any kind of magic.’

‘Why?’

‘It’d breach the wards. Voldemort would know. Chances are that he’ll appear and do me in right there.’

‘You already know the plan very well,’ she congratulated him, beaming.

Harry smiled weakly. ‘Thanks. One question I’ve been meaning to ask you. How did you manage to get those photos? I wouldn’t know what’s inside if it weren’t for them.’

Luna smirked. ‘Confidential Auror files from before Voldemort took over. Being a Renegade has its perks.’

Harry grinned at her. Come to think about it, his uneasiness was decreasing by the minute, while his excitement increased. Blimey, Voldemort wouldn't know what hit him. He was going to be so –

‘At last!’ Luna cried.

Harry sighed in relief. The Death Eater had swallowed the Polyjuice Potion. He rose to his feet and transformed into his phoenix form, immensely proud he had managed to complete the transformation in a record time. He could only hope that when he transformed back into a human, his buttocks wouldn't be as burnt as they had been the last time. That had hurt.

He saw Snorkack casting a Petrificus Totalus on Devreux. That had been quite a brilliant idea of hers. There had been two major problems when they decided to use the Polyjuice Potion: one, it only lasted for an hour, and they wanted their deception to last for a long time, especially since as soon as a comrade Death Eater noticed one of them there, he would raise the alarms; and two, those foul creatures would notice the unharmed state of his soul. Petrified, they could detect that he was still alive, but hopefully, would think that it was because he was losing his mind.

He fetched Devreux with his talons and sent one look at Snorkack, nodding briefly at her while she wished him good luck and told him that Kreacher would take her and his trunk back to his house.

Harry burst into flames and disappeared.

-oOoOoOoOo-

It was cold. It was damp and derelict and it chilled him to the bone. The air smelled rotten, and the phoenix inside him couldn't and didn't want to flame inside. He fought against the impulse to retreat, he

coaxed the mind of the animal, no matter how much he abhorred the place, echoes of death in his ears.

Harry appeared as a haze of flames inside Azkaban; on the seventh floor facing the North, cell number 7G.

Where Albus Dumbledore had been thrown into years ago.

He dropped the Death Eater and looked around frantically, trying to catch a glimpse of his former Headmaster.

The cell was dingy and gloomy and filthy. No light filtered into it and Harry had to fight the urge to transform back and cast a Lumos Spell. He knew he couldn't. He crawled around, trying to be as quiet as he could, hoping that he would find the body of his mentor.

His phoenix was disgusted, matted filth getting stuck to his claws. But he had to carry on.

He flew onto the bed and Harry opened his eyes widely. He had landed on a knee.

Quickly, before anything bad could happen, Harry burst into flames again and left behind the one place he never wanted to think about again.

If he could, he would blow up Azkaban.

A tribute to Sirius. A tribute to Dumbledore. A tribute to all those who never deserved to live through such a nightmare.

-oOoOoOoOo-

He landed quite ungracefully on the floor, a loud crashing sound resonating through his house. He transformed back into his human body, hoping he hadn't harmed his old Headmaster too much.

He gasped in horror when he looked at him. He hadn't been able to see him while in Azkaban, and, quite frankly, he didn't have the time to gaze at him and see the full extent of how much the wizard gaol had affected the old warlock. But now he could see it clearly, and so could Luna, who had run to him, her wand brandished, ready to curse him if he didn't prove his identity, only to drop it quite dramatically.

He looked like the shadow of what the Albus Dumbledore he had known had been. He was nothing but skin and bone. He looked frail and decrepit, unlike the image of pulsing power and confidence Harry knew only too well. His once silvery grey hair was longer than it had ever been, black with filth. His prisoner robes were too baggy for his skeletal-thin body; nothing like the eccentric garments that stood out a mile wherever he went. He was as pale as death, his skin wrinkly and nearly translucent. He stank, but Harry supposed that was normal. He didn't think the Dementors cared much about hygiene.

Luna approached him gingerly while Kreacher carried behind him what looked like Honeydukes' complete stock of chocolate. Harry smiled sadly. His Headmaster wouldn't get anything but chocolate for a long time, no Sherbet Lemons.

Harry was dreading the moment when he found out about Dumbledore's mental health. His body, no matter how weak it was, could be brought back to health. But the mind was something completely different. He knew Dumbledore would be terribly affected by the Dementors, witnessing again and again the death of his sister, never knowing if he had been him the one who had struck the fatal blow. Harry prayed his mind resembled nothing like the Longbottoms'.

Dumbledore looked fast asleep and unperturbed. Harry didn't know what to think. He only hoped it was some sort of defence mechanism,

and not what the pessimistic part of him told him. That the Albus Dumbledore he had known was gone, and only his shell remained.

He tried everything. He tried to wake him up by first calling him and then shouting his name, he Enervated him; he poured freezing water down on his face, he asked Kreacher to sing.

But nothing worked, and Harry was crying. And Snorkack was crying while she performed cleaning charms on him.

Albus Dumbledore was gone.

He didn't want to admit it, but it hurt more than he could have ever imagined: to lose him – again. He had manipulated him as much as he had pleased, but Harry knew he had always held a special place in the old Headmaster's heart.

The pain was excruciating. He hadn't even noticed that he was hugging Kreacher while he cried his heart out, and Kreacher was sobbing too. He had been so hopeful about this plan, he so wanted his mentor back. He wanted to forgive him for all the pain he had caused him, he wanted to smile at his oddities; he wanted him to cry "Nitwit! Blubber! Oddment! Tweak!", he wanted him to sing "Hoggy Warty Hogwarts" once more, he wanted his guidance and his unwavering trust in him. He wanted Albus Dumbledore back.

'HARRY!' Snorkack yelled. 'Something's trying to break the Fidelius Charm!'

He dazed to the core of the wards to see the intruder, ready to defend his home and the people in it with his life –

A fog of flames swam around him in a fury him and Harry realised what it meant.

‘Fawkes.’

He granted the phoenix entrance and the flames dashed past him and onto Dumbledore’s chest. Harry stared at the sight, bewildered. Fawkes was inside the Headmaster’s body, it was obvious from the increasing glow he was emitting, soft golden reddish flames encasing him. It started slowly, only the tips of his fingers and his long and crooked nose regaining a human colour, and then the warmth started spreading through the whole body, and Dumbledore started looking alive.

The flames surrounding him sparked for a fleeting instant and then dwindled progressively before three pairs of astonished eyes.

Fawkes reappeared and made himself comfortable on top of Dumbledore’s chest, while Harry waited for him to wake up.

But nothing happened, and Harry felt the world crash on him.

‘Fawkes?’ he asked brokenly.

The phoenix gazed at him calmly and Harry could swear Fawkes had sent him a smile.

And then he began to sing. A melody so soft and heart-warming it made Harry smile. It spoke of rebirth, of freedom, of hope, of friends reunited, of love; images of Light flooded through his mind, healing wounds that were not physical, but deep gashes that had been made on his soul.

Albus Dumbledore opened his eyes.

‘Now I understand why Severus disliked rollercoaster rides,’ he

mumbled.

‘Sir?’ Harry asked weakly.

Dumbledore turned his head to him slowly, as if it pained him, and then gasped. ‘James?’

Harry shook his head. ‘No, I’m -’

‘Harry?’ Dumbledore asked in a whisper, not daring to believe it, gazing at Harry as if he were the biggest miracle ever.

Harry nodded faintly. ‘How do you feel?’

‘Old. In need of a shower.’

Harry smiled. ‘Well, for the first thing I really can’t do anything about it; as for the second, there are two bathrooms in this house, so you can shower whenever you want,’ Harry said happily.

‘Headmaster,’ Snorkack chipped in, ‘why don’t you shower tomorrow, after you’ve had a good night’s sleep?’ she suggested.

Dumbledore beamed at her. ‘That, Ms Lovegood is the most excellent idea I’ve heard in the past few years,’ he said nonchalantly. ‘Now, should I sleep on the floor -?’

‘Er, there are enough beds,’ Harry said, flummoxed at the Headmaster’s words. ‘Unless you want to sleep on floor?’ He asked meekly. Considering how eccentric Dumbledore was, he wouldn’t put it past him.

Dumbledore assured him that no, he wasn't that odd.

The four of them helped the Headmaster settle comfortably in one of the rooms and let him alone with Fawkes to rest. With the lights on.

Harry bid good night to Luna and Kreacher and slumped down on the couch, kicking off his shoes in one swift move and planting his feet on the sofa, a glass of Firewhiskey in his hand. He removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes gently. He was exhausted.

But as he took a sip of his drink, happiness came rushing towards him at what they had achieved that day.

Harry smiled. Life, sometimes, was good.

-oOoOoOoOo-

DISCLAIMER:

‘Who are you, you weasel? I, Draco Malfoy, son of Lucius Malfoy and Narcissa Black Malfoy of the Noble House of Malfoy, command you to reveal yourself in the name of all that's Malfoy!’

I snicker at Draco's words. He's such a mummy's little boy. Honestly, what a tongue twister. In case you were wondering, dear reader, about my sanity, I am very sane indeed, only I have the misfortune to have numerous encounters with JKR's characters, especially with pre-exams hysteria. At first I struggled against it, but then I accepted it. Tommy helped a lot. Wonderful lad.

‘You scoundrel unbefitting of the presence of a Malfoy -’

‘Oy, Malfoy ferret! Shut up, will you? I'm trying to study Anatomy!’

You know, the good thing about me being a real person opposed to JKR's characters is that, in my head, they can consent to my every whim. For instance, right now, I want Draco dressed as Eminem.

‘Oy! What the Malfoy are these things?’

Ah. Life's good.

-oOoOoOoOo-

A/N: Long time, no update, I know. I'm terribly sorry. These must have been the most frantic months I've ever lived through. I hope you enjoyed the chapter. See? No evil cliffie this time! ;-p

Please, do review.

Until next time,

Vermouth

Member of the Siriusan Order

(REVISED by my incredibly talented beta-reader Hasufel, without whom this story would sometimes have the vocabulary of a toddler.)

Chapter Nine

Firewhiskey Blues

TRAITOR AND MURDERER ALBUS DUMBLEDORE DIES IN HIS CELL!

By Justina Jugson

Wilfred Wilkes, 34, Auror at Azkaban, revealed early this morning that the convict Albus Dumbledore died of natural causes yesterday night in his cell in the wizard prison. Wilkes revealed that everything was alright yesterday night when he went to give the prisoner his dinner: 'He wasn't exactly chatty or anything, since he's been always an unnervingly quiet prisoner, but there was nothing wrong then because when I retrieved the plate, it was already empty,' Wilkes told the Daily Prophet, 'and no-one can enter Azkaban without us knowing; after all, it was Lord Britain who set up the wards there – nobody can penetrate them without explicit permission,' he added fervently, trying to eliminate the rumours circling around that some righteously angry person had broken into Azkaban to make Dumbledore pay for the crimes he had committed, which wouldn't have been surprising at all, I might add.

Most of us are glad that the treacherous scum that was Albus Dumbledore is finally dead. This way we know he won't harm any innocents again. We may now sleep peacefully knowing that such a dangerous man is forever gone, and will only remain as a long forgotten nightmare.

No sooner had Wilkes brought the news to the Ministry, then a huge raucous party broke out, officials and visitors alike bonded by the common joy at hearing about the death of one of the most notorious criminals in the history of our noble Britain. The young and intrepid Auror smiled shyly when I commented about the hero status he now holds for having brought such wonderful news.

Curious about his death, I asked about how he had find out about it. Shrugging his shoulders, he said simply, 'I was doing my morning rounds in that area and when I passed by his cell, something caught my eye: he was lying on the floor and not moving at all,' he stated, smiling slightly at the memory, 'I didn't dare to hope for it; so after several minutes of just standing there and seeing that not a single muscle moved – I couldn't even see him breathing – I entered his cell,' he said sheepishly. What a bold move, my readers, what a bold and brave move indeed. Dumbledore, no matter traitorous and weakened by his stay in Azkaban, was still until yesterday one of the most powerful magic-wielders in Europe; although he never was a match for Lord Britain, as had been continuously shown, he could still wipe the floor with most of us. When I said that, he just replied nonchalantly 'Well, someone had to do it; and to be frank, I'm glad it was me. I found him there, pale and as stiff as a board. After a few medical spells, I determined he was dead and brought the wonderful news to the Ministry,' he finished, smiling in a ruggedly handsome way.

It is Aurors like Wilfred Wilkes that bring peace to our Nation. It is Aurors like Wilfred Wilkes that are brave enough to do what must be done. It is Aurors like Wilfred Wilkes that bleed to death to protect and serve the people of Great Britain from the hands of criminals like Albus Dumbledore and The Renegades.

Albus Dumbledore was once a very known figure, both for being the Headmaster of Slytherin School (formerly "Hogwarts") where he ruled over the student body with his terrorist ways, and a very politically influential person, holding positions of power by means of corruption and blackmailing. Being such a notorious man, one must ask about his funeral: 'He has already been buried in the common graveyard of Azkaban, and that's it. No criminal should have a decent burial,' Wilkes stated firmly, his face set on a serious expression, 'I'll truly never understand why our great Lord Britain never allowed the Dementors to perform the Kiss on that mongrel.'

Indeed, that is something many of us wondered; but then again, we cannot even begin to understand how Lord Britain's mind works; for he is merciful and compassionate. 'He was my teacher,' he confessed, a sad expression on his face, 'I trusted him with my life, and viewed him as a parental figure,' he explains, his voice so forlorn he broke my heart; 'and I suppose that one small part of me believed that he would regret his actions and come back to me, because everyone deserves a second chance,' he finished and excused himself, a despairing expression on his handsome features – and for that, only for that, we must all hate Dumbledore: the coward, the fool, the betrayer, the criminal and the one who has caused so much grief to Lord Britain.

But for now, let us rejoice that we are truly free of that threat, let us enjoy the camaraderie found only on special occasion such as this one, let us celebrate that the greatest enemy of our Nation has passed away!

For Dumbledore's trial, turn to page 2.

For Dumbledore's heinous crimes, turn to page 5.

For Dumbledore's reign of terror at Slytherin School, turn to page 25.

-oOoOoOoOo-

For the first time since he was brought into this foreign Britain, Harry woke up refreshed, not a drop of exhaustion in his body. It had been a very long time since he had slept so thoroughly; in fact, he could not remember any other time he had managed to be so rested and relaxed in all his life. He supposed that when he was a baby he had done so, save for the restless nights he had woken up his parents when he cried; but his memory couldn't go back that far. However, he could say without any doubt that with the Dursleys he had never managed to sleep more than five hours a night for one reason or

another - Dudley throwing one of his infamous tantrums at some ungodly hour, mainly. When he went to Hogwarts, he thought that was what a normal –well, as normal as Hogwarts could get, anyway - life should be, and believed his hours of daily sleep would be normal. Needless to say, Voldemort didn't care too much about Harry's health. But that day, after having rescued Dumbledore from Azkaban, Harry felt unworried, relaxed, drained but content and even – dare I say it – optimistic.

His eyes fluttered open with the first rays of sunshine that illuminated his face, warming his skin ever so slightly, tickling him, until it woke him up - and for once he rose off the bed and into the bathroom without any usual morning grogginess. He snickered at the thought of how appalled Ron would be at his unusual morning briskness. Ron believed that getting up early was only for hens and chickens; oh, and for Hermione, of course, who was just weird.

Harry felt a sudden pang of loss when he thought about his friends. He missed them like he would never have thought he could. He sighed as he watched his face, 'I guess you really don't value things until they are gone,' he muttered to the mirror in front of him.

'It's one of the Wrackspurts effects, dear,' the mirror said merrily.

Harry blinked once. Twice. Thrice. Many times. And then he laughed. 'Trust Lu – Snorkack – to enchant the mirrors...'

He shook his head as he stepped into the shower, relaxing under the hot stream of water. He promised himself he would start looking for ways to bring his friends back to him, especially now that he had both Snorkack and Dumbledore, both of whom knew his real identity. He felt somewhat guilty at the thought of telling either Sirius or his father who he was, but somehow he just felt even more uneasy at the thought of letting them know exactly who he was. He knew he had been beyond ecstatic when he had seen them both; it was like a

dream come true for an orphaned boy like him, but somehow he didn't feel like a part of the family anymore. As he had told himself again and again, it was only normal because he had grown up without his parents. Plus, there was the fact that apparently he had a brother – Julian. He would just disrupt their lives if he entered them proclaiming he was their long lost son, godson and brother. Also, there was the tiny wee hitch of Lord Voldemort: if Riddle got wind that he was the Harry Potter, he would set the Potters and Sirius as primary targets. He told himself hiding his identity was for the best; that he didn't want to risk their lives. But the truth was that he was bloody terrified, he didn't know if they would accept them; he had not been raised by them, they didn't know him, they didn't know what he had done and what he still had to do. They didn't know he had sacrificed the life of one young Death Eater to rescue Dumbledore. True, the Death Eater was scum and doing that had been for the Greater Good; but still, it made him wonder if he was just turning as bad and as manipulative as Dumbledore had been.

He sighed, defeated; he just didn't know what to think. He needed Hermione to use her impossibly logical brain to analyse this situation and tell him the most coherent and blatant answer. He needed Ginny to smack the back of his head, tell him he was an idiot and then snog the hell out of him. He needed Ron to shrug his shoulders and suggest a game of chess or a friendly Chaser-Keeper match.

Harry knew he had to do something about his friends. First of all, he didn't think he could pull this stunt without them and their support. If there was one thing true about them, more important than Ron's strategies, Hermione's brilliant ideas and Ginny's ferocity; it was the fact that they kept him sane and on his toes. Bloody hell, he needed them and he was going to have to do something about it soon, because he knew that although safe and sound in that world, they would never forgive him if he left them there in the dark. Considering how much pain he had gone through because of that, he wouldn't do that to his closest friends.

But it was not just those three he needed. He missed the Weasleys, the Burrow, he missed Luna and Hoggy Warty Hogwarts – he even missed Peeves. He slumped down on his bed and buried his face in his hands; he needed Neville. They should have given him the “Harry Mark”; apart from being a good and loyal friend, he was dead useful and they would sorely need his Herbology expertise. And he just missed the shy and quiet Gryffindor. He just wished he was there, too.

POP.

‘AHHH!’

Harry rose to his feet, his wand brandished and at the ready to attack whatever had just landed on the floor of his room, breaking through the supposedly impenetrable Fidelius Charm. The lump on the floor was humanoid and covered in what looked green goo, leaves and a – wait a moment, was that a Mimulus Mimbletonia?

‘Neville?’ he asked softly, lowering his wand about an inch, his eyes wide open in surprise and disbelief.

The lump lifted his head, and, although covered in green goo and possibly Stinkskap, Harry could clearly recognise Neville’s features.

‘Oh, hi, Harry! Help me up, won’t you?’ he asked cheerfully, as if having just crossed worlds was something as usual as rain in England.

Harry didn’t dare to believe what he was seeing; his mind told him it was impossible: Neville hadn’t been branded by him, after all; but his gut told him he was just that, Neville Longbottom.

He was about to extend his hand to help him up, when he decided to set a fierce scowl on his face, Moody's "CONSTANT VIGILANCE!" ringing in his ears as if the old and scarred Auror was just next to him, deafening him with his yelling. 'If you are Neville Longbottom, answer these questions: first, what did Malfoy curse you with in our first year at Hogwarts and second, who lifted the curse?'

The person on the floor seemed at bit lost at first, but then answered. 'Malfoy cast a Leg-Locker Curse, I came hopping all the way to Gryffindor Tower - I don't remember the password, it was Hermione who lifted the spell. I told you that everyone knew I wasn't brave enough to be in Gryffindor and you said that I was worth twelve Malfoys. Then you gave me a Chocolate Frog and I gave you the card, because you collected them. It was Albus Dumbledore. And you said something about Nicholas Flamel?' It was more a question than a statement.

That was more than enough for Harry. He didn't care that he would get soaked in green goo; he pocketed his wand and pulled him off the floor. 'It's good to have you here, Neville,' he said sincerely, helping him towards the mattress, wanting to check for any injuries.

Had it been any other question, Harry might have been suspicious, for although the answer was correct, it just fitted too damn well for a person as forgetful as Neville. But that time, well, Harry guessed it was probably the first time someone had boosted his almost nonexistent ego, and helped him become the person he was today. Of course, the DA did most of it, but that was the beginning; and beginnings were such delicate things... Maybe if they hadn't he would still be afraid of his shadow. Maybe not, but he liked Neville the way he was now.

He would never forget his role in the Battle; it was, after all, thanks to him that the final Horcrux, Nagini, was destroyed.

'Is Madam Pomfrey around? I think I've broken some bones...'

Neville said as he landed on the bed.

Harry shook his head. 'Madam Pomfrey isn't alive in this world,' he answered, sadly. After all, he had spent too much time in the clutches of the overzealous school nurse. 'She was a Muggleborn,' he added, his voice hardening, 'and here, Muggleborns aren't allowed to live,' he spat.

Needless to say, Neville was speechless and had forgotten all about his broken parts.

'However, Kreacher is great when it comes to nursing. Between having have been in a house where people loved the Dark Arts and having myself as his master, knowing my knack for trouble...' Harry said sheepishly, 'well, Kreacher is a very good nurse-elf. Kreacher!'

With a loud pop, the elderly House-Elf appeared in the room, his eyes wide in surprise when he saw Neville, all covered in his goo-ish glory, on Harry's bed.

'Master?' he asked tentatively.

Harry smiled. 'Kreacher, this is my friend Neville. I'm not sure how he did this – but he is from our world,' he said happily. 'He has some injuries, would you mind helping him, please?'

Kreacher obliged Harry's wishes without any further questions, and left the room promptly after he finished going through Neville's injuries: two broken metatarsi, a pulled quadriceps, too many bruises and too much dirt on him.

While Neville was being healed, Harry wondered how it was that he had been able to cross worlds. He hadn't branded him with the "Harry Mark", but he had seen it on his right forearm when Kreacher

was diagnosing his body and healing the bruises there. So he guessed that somehow, Hermione had managed to be able to brand others without him, to link them to him without being there. All in all, he was very happy that Neville was there, but he couldn't help the feeling that he was in the dark, not knowing how many people were risking their lives for the crazy mission he had to accomplish; and that made him very nervous and anguished.

He did wonder, however, how was it that Neville was able to be here with him while it had been impossible to summon Ron, Ginny and Hermione. The only possible explanation would be that the three of them were alive in this world. Hermione, well, she might be alive, but it was highly unlikely, since the Muggleborn persecution was all over Europe and had become stricter by the day. She might've fled Hogwarts and Great Britain if she was lucky, but it seemed very uncertain that she had managed to avoid all of the Dark Lord's forces with only one year of training at Hogwarts. However, when it came to Ron and Ginny, he was at a loss. They were not alive in this world. He had seen the headlines, he had read the articles and had visited their graves. They were not alive; so what force was preventing them from crossing worlds?

He asked Neville that, but the latter didn't have any ideas as to what might be happening. He did tell them, though, that all of his friends were furious because they were beginning to think that Harry didn't want them there, that he had not summoned them because he was doing a very Gryffindorish thing, risking himself to keep them safe.

Harry, of course, said that while for some time that might've been true, it was not like that at the moment. He had tried and tried and tried to bring them there, but to no avail. He was a bit hurt that his friends might think that he wouldn't carry out his promises.

Neville sighed. 'Harry, let's face it: you do have a saving people thing.'

Harry winced. Yes, that was true.

‘So what’s happening over there? The Ministry people being bigots and demanding to know where I am? How did you get the Mark? How many people have it?’

Neville scratched his now clean forehead in thought. ‘Things aren’t as easy as when you left,’ he admitted, a flash of sadness crossing his eyes. ‘The economy is going down, the Ministry is in shambles, and harvests are going dry because it doesn’t rain anymore in rainy England. It’s all like that. It’s mayhem. And the thing is that we don’t know why,’ he finished forcefully, a single tone of anguish and desperation in his voice.

Needless to say, Harry was in shock, and the only thing that came to his mind was a very Ronnish thing to say. ‘Bloody hell.’

‘My thoughts exactly,’ Neville said wearily, while playing with his wand. ‘Harry, the thing is that it just happened out of the blue. The day you left was the last day it rained, and things just started going downhill from then on. We have gone through eight earthquakes already, and the Muggles have no explanation to that either since there is apparently no, er, hypocentre and ee-pill-centre, either. I don’t understand any of that, but since Hermione understands what the Muggles talk about, well, I guess they are right. And also -’

Snorkack, Luna, whatever entered Harry’s room with a loud bang, talking to herself about who-knows-what until she stopped in her tracks, when she saw Neville.

‘Luna?’ he asked tentatively.

That snapped her out of her daze. ‘I’m not Luna, I’m Snorkack. And

the boy next to you is not Harry, he is Gryffindor,' she said calmly but somewhat briskly. 'I have received a message from my captain, Owl. They request your presence tonight, and I will take you there,' she added in a business-like, Hermione-ish tone. 'Dumbledore is awake and is asking for you,' she finished promptly and left the room, without letting either of the boys say a single word.

Neville turned to Harry, troubled. 'What was that all about?' he asked blankly.

Harry sighed. 'That was Luna Lovegood's counterpart in this world, Snorkack. C'mon, I'll explain you our situation while we go to Dumbledore's room,' he said, helping Neville up.

'What? Dumbledore's alive?'

'Yeah, we just got him from Azkaban yesterday.'

Neville whistled. 'This place is sure messed up.'

Harry grinned. 'Tell me about it,' he said, rolling his eyes.

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'No, it cannot be done like that, Professor. I do respect you, but this time it won't be like that again. Maybe I'm taking more risks this way, maybe I am not. But with all due respect, Professor Dumbledore, you have just escaped a prison that drives people mad within a year, and I'm not sure I trust your judgement yet,' Harry said fiercely, balling his fists over the wooden table, the glasses of Firewhiskey around them shaking. 'I will listen to you, because you have the knowledge, age, experience and brain that I don't have, but that doesn't mean you will take the leadership of this resistance group because there will be no

leader in it; no pawns, no puppets. And if I have to pull the Life Debt you owe me, then so will I. I will make my own decisions and consult them but I will not be a pawn again.'

The rest of the table was silent: Dumbledore was thoughtful and sad; Neville was still going through the shock of seeing his old Headmaster alive. Snorkack, however, was giving Harry her silent approval.

Dumbledore sighed. 'I am starting to believe that my previous strategies and tactics would be neither adequate nor welcomed in the current situation. However, I cannot stop imploring you not to take drastic actions without consulting with me first.'

Harry smiled. 'That I can do, Professor Dumbledore.'

It was just then that they both formed an alliance, one based in equality and trust. One that would save many lives and doom some others.

-oOoOoOoOo-

For some reason, it seemed that all of the Death Eaters had left Hogwarts – Slytherin School – that day, so Harry decided that it would be best to contact the people at Hogwarts immediately and talk to them in person as soon as they got a chance to.

As inconspicuously as possible, the group of four sent themselves to Hagrid's hut. It was a proof of how incapable and overconfident Death Eaters were that the alarms of the school didn't go off as soon as they crossed the threshold. The wards didn't act up against them, and that only made them think that Death Eaters thought it impossible that someone would try to release Hogwarts from their clutches, believing that Voldemort had absolute power and no-one dared to defy him. They were too content and believed themselves safe against any outer aggression.

That could only play in Harry's favour.

Snorkack, Neville and Harry were all wearing special robes that covered all of their features. They were invisible by means of the Disillusionment Charm. Dumbledore, however, wore no other disguises than his own brand of wandless magic to make himself invisible. Harry was itching to ask him how he did that, it could come in handy.

They had decided to reveal Snorkack and Neville's presence when all of the people they were to see were gathered. It'd be easier for them to explain things just once, instead of doing so many times. Harry was sceptical, but he didn't say anything since he was outvoted.

Knock, knock.

Sirius opened the door slowly. At first, he looked tired and weary, but soon his expression changed to utter confusion. There was nobody there!

'What the hell?' he asked.

Harry quickly pushed him in and removed the Disillusionment Charm from himself, covering Sirius' mouth with his hand to extinguish his yelp.

'It's me, Gryffindor,' he whispered.

Sirius' eyes went wide open in recognition, and Harry removed his hand from his mouth. 'Gee, you could have said that before. I would have welcomed you in, full-stop. No need to make me feel as if I'm going to be murdered,' he muttered darkly.

Harry snorted. 'Right. And I believe you,' Harry retorted sarcastically. 'Have you told the others to come here?' he asked.

Sirius nodded. 'Yeah. We have some questions to ask you, especially after having read the Daily Prophet today,' he said angrily, tossing him a copy of Britain's wizard newspaper.

'Oh, bloody hell!' Harry cursed, reading the headlines that clearly stated that Dumbledore was dead. No wonder Sirius looked mad at him. He might actually think he had killed off the former Headmaster.

'Well?' Sirius asked icily, while shooting beams out of his wand, presumably to contact the others, telling them to come down to Hagrid's hut at once. 'I thought you were going to save Dumbledore, not off him,' he spat venomously, his wand reaching Harry's chin, his grey eyes dancing with fury.

'I – I can explain -'

'What is there to explain? I trusted you! I suppose this was some sort of plot to catch the Disgraces unaware, wasn't it? Because that's all you want, don't you? To bloody do me in so you can get the Black fortune?' Sirius ranted vindictively, applying more pressure to Harry's throat.

Harry could feel his heart break. Maybe this could've been avoided if he had come clean from the start, if he had told Sirius who he was. He only wanted to save them this time around. But the look on Sirius' eyes – Harry knew it was certain his godfather wouldn't believe him now. It was a tale already difficult to believe, and now...

‘Sirius, that’s enough!’ another voice said authoritatively.

Harry could’ve kicked himself, hard. Of course! Bloody Dumbledore was there to bloody prove he wasn’t bloody effing dead!

A rush of magic twirled around Harry, making his senses tingle for some reason, and he saw Dumbledore appearing just next to him before Sirius’ very shocked face.

‘But – but you are dead!’ Sirius cried, not daring to believe what he was seeing. Leaving his wand where it was, just under Harry’s chin, he quickly snatched the newspaper from Harry’s hands with the other one and waved it over Dumbledore’s face, as if to prove his point, that Dumbledore was dead. Sirius seemed unfazed by the fact that he was making his former Professor eat his own very long and very silver beard. Bloody hell, Sirius was nutters.

‘Sirius, calm down,’ Dumbledore said softly yet imperiously, and his godfather instantly stopped smacking the old warlock with the drenched newspaper. ‘Now, it is very wise of you, my dear boy, to be wary of my presence, for, as this copy says, I am, in fact, dead,’ Dumbledore said enigmatically, emphasising the last parts of his words. Conjuring a blue-with-bumblebees chintz wandlessly, he sat down on it and glanced over the article for a few seconds and then raised his gaze, ‘and yet, I am here. How can that ever be possible?’ he asked rhetorically, as if he were questioning his favourite student about a very entertaining magical paradox. For once, Harry was amused at Dumbledore’s irritating antics since they were not directed at him. Not very nice of him, but such is life.

‘But no matter how many times I say to you that I am Albus Dumbledore, you will not believe my claim until I prove it to you,’ the

Headmaster said calmly, entertaining himself with the two-dimensional bumblebees that zoomed around his chintz. 'As you no doubt guessed the moment I performed this piece of wandless magic, I can only be two people: myself or Voldemort,' he explained serenely, as if he was simply explaining that magical paradox to his favourite student, who had failed to find an explanation for it.

'As for what Voldemort might do to convince you that he is me, I do not know. I cannot even fathom what he would gain from that experience,' he proceeded. Twirling his beard, Dumbledore continued, 'unless he wanted to know what it feels like to have facial hair.'

'So that moves us to the point: how do I convince you that I am myself, Albus Dumbledore? Simple, by telling you something only you and I know,' he stated, and then twirled his beard again. 'You do remember the day you were brought into my office for the second time after you pulled that cruel and thoughtless prank on Severus, one that might have cost his life?' he asked, and without waiting for answer, he continued talking. 'If my memory serves me well, you had already been at the end of your friends' rage, especially James Potter's rage.'

Harry saw Sirius blush, and that intrigued him. He knew Dumbledore was talking about the prank that led a teenager Snape into the passage past the Whomping Willow, where Remus Lupin was placed every lunar cycle to go through his monthly transformation into a werewolf. But he had never heard about the aftermath, and that made him curious.

'Now, it is my belief that James thought that it was the Marauders' duty to punish you for your rash actions, and not anyone else's. Or perhaps he thought that you felt ashamed enough and wanted to lift

your spirits; I'll have to ask him about that at some point,' he paused, not noticing the red cheeks Sirius supported. 'However, even the best of us fail, and instead of raising your spirits, he embarrassed you deeply,' he continued, smiling slightly in reminiscence. 'He Confounded a pigeon into believing she was to mate with Fawkes, but instead, the pigeon went after you -'

Harry couldn't help it, he laughed loudly at that. Sirius sent some venomous glares his way, but he released the pressure of the wand from his chin, albeit grudgingly.

'Fine, fine, it's you alright. I believe you,' he muttered morosely. 'But then what's with the article?' he asked, nodding at the newspaper that was still in Dumbledore's hands.

The elderly Professor glanced again at the article and Harry guessed he was skimming through it, trying to decipher what had happened.

'It's a wee bit overdramatic, and some parts are clearly twisted since Tom Riddle and I never had any sort of relationship that could be considered more than the usual teacher-student relationship, but I do not think this is a hoax. I think it's real -'

BOOM.

'YOU KILLED MY BROTHER! YOU KILLED MY BROTHER BEFORE I COULD PUNCH AND BREAK HIS NOSE AGAIN! YOU KILLED MY BROTHER!'

Pow.

'OUCH!' Harry yelled, after Aberforth Dumbledore's fist punched

him square on his left jaw. He barely had time to cup his jaw before the wayward Dumbledore brother grabbed his robes, lifting him a several of inches from the floor and thrust him against the wall.

‘Aberforth! Enough!’ Professor Dumbledore shouted, intercepting his brother as he was about to swing another hellish punch at Harry.

Aberforth looked as if he had just been slapped. ‘What the hell, Albus?’ he asked verbosely, letting go of Harry as if he was on fire.

‘Hello, brother,’ said Dumbledore merrily, ‘and hello Minerva, James,’ he added, turning to the door of the hut.

Cupping his injured jaw, Harry turned his head towards the door, and yes, standing right there were a gobsmacked Minerva McGonagall, and his own very confused father, James Potter. Hooray! Now the party could start! Would anyone care to punch a Boy-Who-Lived again, please? All the money is given to spew!

Harry sighed slightly: he was bloody loosing it. He concentrated on his aching jaw and tried to move it a bit, but stopped only about a second later, wincing. Waving his hand and concentrating on the amount of magic he wanted to pour into the spell, he thought ‘Hielo!’ A small chunk of ice appeared in his hand and, after conjuring a small plastic bag to put the ice in, he glued it against his injured jaw.

Fortunately or unfortunately, Dumbledore was the only one to see that bit of wandless magic. Harry cursed himself; he should have used his wand. Oh well, it’s not worth crying over the split potion.

‘Bloody hell, Aberforth... You sure pack a punch!’ he said, half-jokingly, to break the tension. To be honest, he couldn’t really blame him. No matter how much of Death Eater propaganda the

Prophet published, they wouldn't twist the facts with something as earth-shattering as Dumbledore's – the Kingdom's Traitor – death. Plus, barely one week ago they had met in secret and talked about Dumbledore, so it wasn't that strange to have been punched by the brother of the presumed dead Headmaster. Still, it would've been nice if he hadn't jumped to conclusions...

'Thanks, I think' he said, not sounding very apologetic. He then turned to his brother. 'Well?' he asked impatiently.

'Albus? Is it really you?' McGonagall asked, a slight tremor in her voice, as if she thought her eyes were cruelly deceiving her.

'Yes, Minerva,' he answered softly. He twirled his hands and another seven comfortable seats appeared. Thankfully, he spared them the bumblebees this time. 'Sit down,' he said, and the seats moved forward and gently hit their calves, making their knees buckle.

'Why are there two other empty seats?' Sirius wondered.

'They are not empty,' another voice said, Snorkack. Both she and Neville appeared then, and the others save for Harry and Dumbledore brandished their wands at them.

'Everyone lower your wands,' Dumbledore commanded, and at once all wands were sheathed back in their respective pockets. 'We are all on the same side.'

Even though no wands were seen, Harry could feel the air so tense he could cut it down with a knife if he had it. But then again, it was

understandable. Dumbledore was supposedly dead, Harry was a mystery, and then suddenly two people appear out of thin air, covered from head to toes, and everyone expects them to be all jolly when war is raging outside? Harry thought not.

‘This is Snorkack,’ he said pointing at Luna, ‘and this is, er -’

They had forgotten about Neville’s name! Oh, bloody flippin’ heck!

‘I’m the Avenger,’ Neville stated fiercely, gazing around proudly, as if daring the others to criticise his chosen name.

Harry thought it was a tad cheesy, but then again, if Neville intended to do what he thought he did, then it was probably the best name to pick. Still, it was a bit cheesy. But then again, Harry had chosen “Gryffindor”, so maybe he should shut up about that.

‘Right. Snorkack is from the Renegades -’

‘You are a Renegade?’ James asked, surprised. ‘But you look so young,’ he added, a frown on his forehead.

‘Does it matter if I’m young or not, Mr Potter?’ Snorkack spat. ‘Did it matter that Draco Malfoy was a first year when he died? Did that matter to your first-born, dead at the age of one?’

‘Snorkack - ENOUGH!’ Harry boomed, not believing what he had just heard. Of all the things to say, that had to be the most hurtful and hateful one she could ever think of. ‘You know very well what it’s like to lose family, so shut up!’

Snorkack glared at him but said nothing apart from a weak apology, but the glares she received did not weaken at all after it. Harry sighed, it was expected. He had hoped they would all get along more or less, but the secrecy and the frayed nerves were taking their toll on them. He sighed again; perhaps things would get better with time.

‘We have many things to discuss and very little time, so it would be wise to leave our hard feelings behind and focus on the task at hand,’ Dumbledore said calmly yet strictly. He swished his wand and eight cups of steaming tea and a couple of bottles of Odgen’s Firewhiskey appeared on a table. Although it would be difficult for Harry, Neville and Snorkack to drink their tea or the Firewhiskey, since their faces were covered up, the gesture was nonetheless appreciated. With one mug in his hand, he waved with the other one the newspaper to catch the others’ attention.

‘As you will have already read in the paper, today the world rejoiced. The cause was my apparent death, which, as it is obvious, is only that – apparent. Sirius here can attest to the wrongfulness of this article,’ he explained, nodding at a blushing Sirius (‘yeah, it’s Dumbledore al lright,’ he muttered darkly). ‘However, it is likely that many of you have questions; and indeed, not retelling this most adventurous game would be a disservice to the person who rescued me from Azkaban,’ he finished, raising his mug to Harry, nodding, and then taking a sip.

Harry could feel his cheeks redden at the sharp looks he was receiving. He had never been particularly skilled when being in the spotlight, and, most definitely, he had never been comfortable with too much attention.

‘You rescued my brother?’ Aberforth croaked, his eyes slightly

brighter.

Harry gulped. 'Yeah,' he answered sheepishly.

'Sorry about your jaw, lad,' Aberforth said, now looking really sorry.

Harry waved a hand in dismissal. His jaw still hurt, and he would most likely have an ugly bruise the following day, but it was not the end of the world.

'How did you get him out? And what's with the article? Is it real?' James asked.

And so, Harry explained it to them. Well, more or less, he did omit some bits, like the fact that he came from another world, that Snorkack was actually Luna Lovegood, and, most important, he didn't tell them he had used his Animagus form to rescue Dumbledore. If news spread that a phoenix Animagus had rescued Dumbledore, then he would see himself very restricted to use that ability. He did tell them about the Death Eater he had captured – but not where he had got him from - and how they had transformed him into Dumbledore by means of Polyjuice Potion and then Petrified him.

'So it's not a lie, then? Someone died, but he looked like Professor Dumbledore?' Sirius inquired, a dangerous gleam in his eyes.

'Er, yes. The Death Eater, Alain Devreux, well, he committed many crimes, and the best place for him was Azkaban. But I didn't think, I didn't realise he would die,' Harry said, feeling the guilt of his death on his shoulders.

‘Nonsense, Gryffindor. He got what he deserved,’ Snorkack said tenaciously.

James frowned again. ‘What I would like to know, is how did you manage to bypass the wards, when not even the Renegades have managed to breach them and not even Dumbledore was able to escape from them?’

Harry gulped. His father was sharper than he had ever imagined. People had always told him his mother had been the brains in the relationship, and if that was true, he was starting to fear his mum.

‘A very wise question,’ McGonagall acknowledged, and all heads turned to face Harry, who, in contrast, was trying to shy away from them.

‘Er...’

‘Like you said, Minerva, it is a very wise question indeed,’ Dumbledore interceded, barely nodding at Harry’s grateful eyes, ‘however, this information is of a very delicate nature, and one must tread softly with it. Should this information ever reach the enemy’s ears, we would lose a very valuable weapon,’ he said, sipping on his tea from time to time.

‘Why? Does he have a contact within the Death Eaters?’ Sirius asked. His eyes glinted for a moment and then narrowed; ‘or is he a Death Eater spy?’

Well, it was a feasible explanation, but still, Harry had to stop himself from gagging at the thought of ever having served that scum.

‘No, none of that -’

‘I flamed in and out,’ Harry said, realising there was no point in beating around the bush. Since they already knew he was a Phoenix Animagus, well, he just hoped they wouldn’t tell anyone. Dumbledore would make sure of that.

‘Bloody hell!’ Sirius exclaimed in awe.

Harry couldn’t help it, he grinned. Sirius could be so much like Ron sometimes. Harry felt a tug on his heart; he did miss his friends.

‘So basically, since Professor Dumbledore is thought to be dead, that gives us more freedom than before,’ Neville – Avenger, Harry berated himself – concluded.

‘Right,’ James said. ‘So what do you need us for? Why are you so keen on informing us?’ he asked suspiciously. ‘We are bound to Hogwarts and Hogsmeade, we cannot go any further.’

‘Gryffindor here was the one who was so interested in keeping you informed, not me,’ Snorkack said promptly.

‘Gee, thanks a bunch, Snorkack,’ Harry retorted sarcastically. This Luna was damn useful, but she was most certainly not a friend of his.

‘However, being in the dark is dangerous, so there’s no harm in

keeping you informed. Apart from that, the brightest mind in the ranks of the Renegades, my captain Owl,' she added with pride, completely ignoring Harry's remark, 'is working on how to release you from it; and if Owl doesn't find a way, nobody will.'

Harry raised an eyebrow at Luna's tune. She seemed to worship the ground her captain walked on.

'Right,' said Sirius blankly. 'So what can we do for you? Is there any task we could carry out for you, even if we can't do much?'

Harry nodded. 'Yes. I think I would need three things. First, I need you to retrieve Ravenclaw's Lost Diadem from the Room of Requirements. Ask the room for a place to hide things. Don't do anything with Ravenclaw's Diadem, and never put it on, it's a Horcrux and I'll have to unlock it before destroying it. As soon as you find it, call upon my House-Elf, he will take it to my hideout where I'll be able to annihilate the piece of soul that lives there. Do you know where the Room is?' he asked, snapping out of his rant.

Both James and Sirius shook their heads, but Professor McGonagall knew where it was. Harry wondered how she had come across it.

'I will do it,' she offered. 'I'll retrieve it as soon as possible. However, I will need some help to fool the Death Eaters, so it's possible it will take me several days to find the best moment to carry it out, Gryffindor,' she said in her usual no-nonsense tone.

Harry nodded at her and then moved on to the following task. 'I need you to contact your spy. Tell him that resistance is on the move,' he said in a low voice, as if he were afraid of someone eavesdropping on them.

Both Sirius and James nodded at that.

‘And last of all, I need you to keep an eye on Hogwarts: staff and students. We need to know what’s going on within its walls to create a better resistance and strike as best as we can -’

‘You want to bring back Hogwarts?’ McGonagall whispered, her voice devoid of her usual briskly tone; instead, it was soft and sad, nostalgic and hopeful. Harry then realised that Hogwarts was not only his home, but the home of many others, too.

‘Yes. I will, but for that I will need you to inform me about our possible allies within the castle’s walls. The Zabinis, the Bullstrodes, the Greengrasses, the Notts...’ he offered as examples.

James gave him a weird look. ‘The Zabinis were slaughtered when they refused to become Voldemort’s minions and remained neutral. The Bullstrodes are supporters but not active followers. The Greengrasses were under the Fidelius Charm but were betrayed by their Secret-Keeper, and they all died at the hands of the Unmentionable number two. The Notts are Death Eaters, save for their estranged son who severed ties with the family some time ago. This is all in public records, and unless you are a two year-old, you should know this,’ James finished, once again suspicious of Harry.

Harry squirmed under his father’s gaze. ‘As I said, I have been, er, indisposed for a very long time,’ he answered.

‘James, leave him be,’ Dumbledore ordered softly. ‘He has a very good reason and he is trustworthy.’

Reluctantly, James tore his gaze from Harry and turned back to Dumbledore.

Harry reclined his back on the chintz. This reunion had been more draining than he had thought it would be. Apart from the punch, the suspicious and hostile looks he received, the tense atmosphere and whatnot, it was the fact that the more he learned, the more troubled he was.

Apparently, in this world, everyone belonged to Voldemort's reign, and getting allies would be much more difficult than he had expected. True, the Renegades were still there, but from what he had gathered, they were not as strong as Snorkack made them appear; they looked crippled and diminished. Suddenly, the task seemed much more foreboding than it once had, back in his own world. There, he could count on people to defend themselves and the population hadn't been so dwindled. Here, the only part of the wizarding world that remained intact was precisely the one he opposed.

Just then, life with the Dursleys didn't seem so hellish as he had once thought.

'Gryffindor, it's time to go,' Snorkack said, snapping him out of his reverie.

Dumbledore and Neville were to be taken back to the Sanctuary by Kreacher; whereas Aberforth, Sirius, McGonagall and his father were to go back to their posts. Snorkack and Harry, well, they had another meeting to go.

Just as they were about to leave, Harry heard Dumbledore whisper very softly to his father, 'don't worry James, I know the location of her Secret-Keeper, and he would give his life before anything happened to her.'

Harry's heart skipped a beat.

His mother was alive.

-oOoOoOoOo-

The safehouse number eight may be found on Cherry Lane number eight; Lewes, England.

Harry memorised the address before igniting the paper. Concentrating hard on the direction, he saw a decent-sized house materialise out of thin air right before him.

It was very dark, he couldn't see the house that well. It did look nearly in ruins, with grey mossy stones and black tiles. The grass around it was wild and packed with weeds, something that Aunt Petunia would heavily frown upon.

Snorkack directed him to the entrance, where the door was wooden, black and mouldy, but stopped him from advancing any further about a foot before it.

‘The wards will kill you otherwise,’ she said. She grabbed her wand and placed the tip of it on the palm of her hand. Muttering something that Harry did not understand between her teeth, her palm grew golden. Hastily, she glued her hand on the door.

‘It is I, Snorkack, of the Chimera team, bringing our guest, Gryffindor,’ she whispered to no-one.

Transfixed, Harry looked at the proceedings. Whoever had built this ward, he was nothing short of a magical genius. It applied the techniques Muggles used for digital identification, but used magic for it, probably identifying the core of the one who sought entrance.

The door opened for them with a creak and a soft feminine voice

rang 'you are late.'

Luna grabbed his hand and pulled him forward into the darkest house he had ever been in. The only thing he could make out from the dark corridors he was flying through were the scant and thin candles that adorned the halls. He couldn't even see the floor he was walking on, let alone know where he was going. It seemed as if Snorkack knew her way very well, for she never made him bump against anything. Then again, the dingy place might as well be a palace from the inside, with wide and ample halls, but since the only thing he could see were candles suspended in midair, he couldn't really have an accurate opinion about the place.

He couldn't let go of the feeling he was being watched, though. He sensed as if countless eyes were following his every move, whispering behind him...

Another door creaked open and the light that came out blinded him for a few seconds. There, on the threshold of that room, Snorkack released his hand from her firm grip and walked towards the large black table before him.

Adjusting himself to the new light, Harry saw Luna take a seat at the end of a table packed with people, all covered from head to toes in very dark robes, most of them either sipping from a glass or clutching it, countless bottles of Firewhiskey laying around. Around twenty of them were looking at Harry avidly, their eyes shining behind what looked like Disfigurement Charms; some of them had a casual air around them, some others looked very tense; but all of them had their eyes fixed on him. Suddenly, Harry felt very naked.

The man in the centre of the table rose to his feet and bowed slightly to him. 'Welcome, Gryffindor,' he said in a rich baritone voice, 'we have heard much about you. Please take a seat,' he added, signalling the chair in front of him.

Harry obliged.

The man sat again and made himself comfortable before speaking again. 'I'm very glad you made it, Gryffindor,' he said in a husky, croaky and wild voice, making some part of his brain think he had at some point met this man in his previous life, 'we have much to discuss, but there is still some time for pleasantries,' he continued. Signalling the person to his right he said, 'this is Owl, the genius in this organisation,' he said fondly, while Harry nodded at Owl. He thought Owl was a woman, but he couldn't really tell. 'And this,' the man continued, nodding at the person to his left, 'this is Squeamish, our sneakiest operative.' The so called Squeamish barely twitched in acknowledgement.

The man placed a hand on his heart. 'And I; I am Dragon, the leader of the Renegades.'

Bloody hell...

-oOoOoOoOo-

DISCLAIMER: CHEESECAKE DOMINATION!

-oOoOoOoOo-

A/N: sorry for the delay... Please review! As usual, for any of you that might be interested, there's a link to my Yahoo! Group on my profile page, the address is:

[http://groups dot yahoo dot com forward slash group forward slash Vermouth underscore Fanfiction](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Vermouth_underscore_Fanfiction)

Until next time,

Vermouth

Member of the Siriusan Order

REVISED by my very amazing beta-reader Hasufel: 22/05/2009

Chapter Ten

Dragon & Owl

Harry felt a tad awkward. The last time he had felt that uncomfortable was when he was tried for having used the Patronus Charm to defend his cousin and himself against two Dementors. Dementors that had been ordered by none other than Dolores Jane Umbridge, Senior Undersecretary to the former Minister. Of course, he didn't know that last bit at the moment his trial was held, but such was the life of Harry Potter.

It was the feeling of having countless eyes on him that made him so uneasy. He had never done well in the centre of everyone's attention, and that wasn't about to change. No matter that he had been on the Quidditch team, fooled a dragon, battled Lord Voldemort in front of the whole school and more; some part of him would always be that awkward shy boy from Number Four, Privet Drive. He would never understand why Ron liked attention so much.

Apart from having so many eyes on him, the place just gave him the creeps. It was dark and dingy, lit by a few soft, murky yellowish candles, with a black wooden table, black walls and black floors. To cap it all, the people there just made him cringe. He felt like a mouse trapped by a horde of hungry cats. He didn't want to show his uneasiness, because who knows what they might think about him if he did, and he truly needed their alliance. But the fact that they were all covered up like him, and that instead of eyes he could only see two white spots of light. Merlin's beard - that only made him think of zombies.

They seemed a very united group; although wary and alert. He couldn't help noticing that only a few members weren't staring at him like an enemy; among them was their very impressive leader, Dragon. However, the woman on his right, Owl, was looking at him like a predator. Harry guessed she wasn't going to be very nice to him.

Harry didn't know what to make of Dragon yet. He thought it was understandable, since he was covered up and had barely uttered a few sentences to him; but Dragon gave him an odd sense of familiarity. It wasn't his voice that reminded him of someone, for Dragon's voice had surely been modified; it was the way he spoke. But who Dragon really was, Harry didn't know yet.

Dragon snapped him out of his musings by clearing his throat. 'Gryffindor, we are very pleased to have you here. These,' he said, pointing at the group of people around him in general, but not signalling any specific person, 'these are my most trusted advisors and friends, out of the five hundred and eighty people that compose the force that is known as the Renegades,' he explained.

He pushed his chair back and walked to where Harry was seated. 'As you might've guessed, we are the only group in existence that actively opposes the murdering bastard who has appointed himself as Lord Britain,' he continued, emphasising Voldemort's new title derisively. 'We are the few people opposed to him that managed to escape and remain unmarked,' he explained, lifting his sleeve and allowing Harry to see a scarred and muscly forearm, completely mark-free. Lowering his sleeve again, he lifted his gaze to Harry and went on with his explanation.

'This form of resistance, although apparently numerous, is weak in comparison to the Dark Scumbag's forces; which is why we need all the help we can get,' he added, lightly clapping Harry's shoulder. Harry couldn't see, but he guessed that Dragon was genuinely smiling at him under his hood.

'There are many forms of resistance in this group, Gryffindor. Not everyone is suited for fighting, after all,' he said, walking back to his seat. 'Owl here is an excellent dueller, but her impossibly talented

mind is one of the greatest pillars of this organisation,' he stated proudly, gripping Owl's shoulder with his gloved hand. Owl lifted her chin, basking in Dragon's approval of her. Harry couldn't help it; he thought she was a bit arrogant.

'Had it not been for her, the Renegades would have fallen and we would never have managed to get as far as we have got,' he said passionately.

All right, so this Owl woman had a reason to look so damned proud. But still, Harry would like her a bit more if she weren't looking at him the way she was, making him feel like a smelly dog. Actually, her pose reminded him a bit of Aunt Petunia's when he was around: stiff shoulders, clenched fists and eyes fixed on him. The feeling of having a magical Aunt Petunia around him just gave him the collywobbles.

'To be frank, we are at a loss when it comes to you,' Dragon proceeded, snapping Harry out of his reverie. Pacing the floor up and down, Dragon assumed a pensive look. 'The Renegades are the only resistance against Lord Voldyturd; as such, we are highly paranoid. We don't accept a new member until we are more than positive he or she will not turn against us. Once we spot a potential recruit, it will take us no less than half a year to inspect their background. If we are satisfied, we will ask the potential recruit to join our ranks. And even then, the number of tests they go through to prove their loyalty to us is endless.'

Owl nodded at that, and then turned to stare at Harry. He could see the sneer and distrust on her face even though it was all covered.

'But with you – the minute I started receiving Snorkack's reports about you – I knew it was different. I cannot explain it, and it

frustrates me to no end, but I know that you are the biggest chance the Renegades have at stopping this travesty that has become Britain,' Dragon said fiercely. 'I know I'm not the only one. Many of us have felt the "pull" the minute you came here. We felt drawn to you. But my mind tells me not to trust you until I know why.'

Harry sighed. He had known this might happen. He would have to reveal himself to Dragon. This whole travelling-between-dimensions sure gave him headaches.

He felt uneasy about blowing his cover, but he knew he needed the Renegades. Also, he did feel as if he had known Dragon in his previous life.

'Alright, I yield. No offence, but could we possibly speak somewhere private?' Harry asked wearily.

Dragon stared at him for a full minute, and then he gave Harry a barely imperceptible nod and turned around. As if on cue, Owl rose hastily from her seat and grabbed Harry's left arm, her nails digging into his flesh.

'I don't care if I feel this "pull" towards you. I don't trust you,' she whispered menacingly in Harry's ear. 'Until I figure out who you are and what you want, I will hear everything you say to Dragon, too,' she finished, letting go of his arm. She spun around calmly and followed Dragon's silhouette.

Harry rubbed his arm, wincing. That Owl woman was someone he'd have to watch out for. She seemed incredibly protective of Dragon. Maybe they were something more than fellow British man and woman united for one cause? It would certainly explain why she pounced on him like an angry mother-bear.

A softer touch grabbed Harry's right arm and led him gently to the door Owl and Dragon had gone through. 'Don't worry too much about her, Gryffindor,' Snorkack said soothingly as they walked, 'she is one of my dearest friends in the Renegades, and she is a very good person.'

Whatever Owl might be, she still scared the hell out of Harry. Owl reminded him of the Third-Year Hermione, when she went bonkers and slapped Malfoy in anger. It was bloody cool back then when they were kids and her anger was directed at his bigoted arch-nemesis. But now he had this scary woman whispering threateningly in his ear, the one woman who was the brains behind the only resistance to Voldemort and an accomplished dueller. Cut Harry some slack, please.

It was with no small apprehension that Harry closed the door behind him. Dragon was sitting on a couch in the middle of the room, and he already had a glass in his hand of what appeared to be Firewhiskey. He looked comfortable, with his legs on the couch and his free arm resting on a cushion. Owl, on the other hand, looked more like a soldier ready to go into the battlefield. That woman was scary.

Luna took his hand and whispered to him. 'Don't be scared, Harry. You know these people. Once they realise who you are, they will follow you until the Great Snorkack takes them onto the next great adventure.' And with that, she plopped down on the couch next to Dragon's.

'I guess you really want to know who I am and where I come from, right?' Harry asked tiredly. Owl gave him a curt nod, so he drew up a chair and sat on it. Elbows on his knees, he took a few seconds to massage his neck, trying to get rid of his uneasiness. 'I guess, I don't really know how to explain this. I know who I am, but I'm not sure if you would believe me. Technically – I am dead, and I have been since Voldemort killed me as an infant in 1981.'

Owl dropped her wand. Harry smirked, she hadn't expected that. He didn't know why, but he had briefly enjoyed startling the most impressive Owl. Dragon, on the other hand, gave no sign of surprise. He didn't move an inch, and he was still gracefully sipping his glass of Firewhiskey.

'The Voldemort you know attacked my parents' house in 1981, and my infant body has been buried for more than fifteen years -'

'That's absurd!' Owl growled. 'Dragon, have him arrested and taken down to a security cell for questioning!'

Dragon shook his head at Owl and then turned back to Harry, 'I'm also technically dead, but my body was never found. Is the buried child someone else's son?'

Harry sighed again. 'No. It's me. Or rather me from this dimension.'

Hell broke loose. Owl started sputtering and yelling; Dragon dropped his glass on the couch. Only Luna remained calm.

'Sit down,' she said. 'He is telling the truth.' It took a long while to calm down the logical Owl, who kept ranting that alternate dimensions didn't exist. She fought Luna with all of her might, but in the end it seemed that little Snorkack was quite strong as she managed to subdue an infuriated Owl. Dragon was easier to handle, he was so gobsmacked that Luna only needed to perform a Cleaning Charm on the couch.

'I guess there is no easy way for you to believe me until you see my face. I know I have met you in my former life.'

Harry took his wand out slowly, so as not give Owl any reasons to attack him. He brought down all the obscuring charms on his voice and face and lowered his hood, waiting for another round of pandemonium to break loose.

Owl fell from her chair.

‘Harry?’

It seemed that Luna had been right. They knew who he was. He remembered that supposedly everyone got dreams in both dimensions about their alternate egos, but Luna had been the only one whacky (or wise?) enough to believe them. Harry hoped that Dragon and Owl would reveal themselves now to him. If they remembered their dreams, recognising Harry wouldn’t be a difficult thing. He was, after all, the Boy-Who-Lived and the Vanquisher-of-Voldemort. But would he know who these people were? Harry prayed that Luna was right.

Owl approached him. Harry was ready for a second round of verbal attacks, but he was surprised when Owl knelt in front of him and asked him gently, ‘may I?’

Harry had no idea what she wanted to do, but her tone made him nod almost instantaneously.

Owl put her hand on his forehead and remained still for a few seconds, and then gasped, turning around to look at a very expectant Dragon. ‘It’s him!’

Owl then did something he would never have expected her to do: she engulfed him in a hug and cried in his arms.

Harry didn’t really know what to do. He had never had an ounce of

skill when it came to crying girls – the Cho episode back in Fifth Year was proof enough of that – but this time, a total stranger whom he supposed was someone he knew in his former life was crying like a lost girl in his arms. The same stranger who had been willing to hex his bits off five minutes prior to him revealing his true identity.

Women were crazy.

Dragon howled with mirth. ‘No wonder I trusted you the moment you came here, Harry. How could I not trust my erstwhile future brother-in-law?’ He asked happily as he lowered his hood.

Charlie Weasley. BAM.

Harry was so stunned he didn’t notice that Owl had stopped crying and had slipped away from his arms. Still kneeling before him, she whispered, ‘and how could I not feel the pull towards you when you are my erstwhile best friend?’ she said, getting rid of all of the obscuring charms that kept her identity safe.

Hermione Granger. BAM BAM.

Now it was Harry’s turn to sputter. ‘How?’ he managed to ask, not noticing that Luna was grinning like the cat who caught the canary.

Charlie was the first to speak. ‘I suppose you have heard about what happened to the Weasley family here?’ he asked with a growl. Harry nodded. ‘We were ambushed. I was outside, practising with one of Dad’s brooms I’d stolen from his shed. I didn’t want my parents to find me with a broom, so I was half-hidden between the trees. Next thing I knew, a loud explosion occurred and a pack of Death Eaters arrived at the Burrow. All of them swarmed into the house save for one. I started running back home,’ he said. Harry could almost touch the pain in his voice.

‘The one Death Eater that remained outside spotted me. Looking

back, had it been another Death Eater, that would have meant my death. I did something foolish, but when your parents and siblings are in danger, what are you supposed to do? Abandon them and hide like a coward? I did what any Gryffindor boy would have done. Armed with a Cleansweep Two, I went to defend my family. The Death Eater immobilised me and Disillusioned me, placing me behind a bush. I remember that he told me “you stupid boy, do you want to die too?”

Harry wondered briefly who could the Death Eater have been. The situation was screaming ‘Snape!’ at him, but since this was another dimension, he couldn’t be sure.

Charlie now had tears in his eyes, and his voice was breaking. ‘I stayed there for hours. I heard their screams, and the explosions and the psychotic Death Eater laughter. But I couldn’t move. I couldn’t move even after the Death Eaters had left, when everything went silent.’

Harry was looking at Charlie, horrified. He couldn’t even begin to imagine the pain he had gone through, and the mental scars he would have for the rest of his life. Having to go through that experience had to be one of the most traumatising things a child could go through. He remembered what he had been told about the Weasley massacre. He had been torn when he heard about it but unlike Charlie, he had not been there, paralysed, unable to do anything while his family was tortured and slaughtered.

‘I don’t know how long I stayed there, but the charm finally wore off.

Shakily, I rose to my feet and walked towards the Burrow. I saw the ominous Dark Mark hovering around my home, so I knew what was inside,’ he sobbed. Curling his fist, he punched the couch in anger. ‘Nothing can prepare you to see your family reduced to chunks of flesh and bone, Harry. Nothing. I looked all around the house, but nobody was left alive. What was left of my mum, the Death Eaters had put in a stew. Ron’s cradle had a charred baby corpse. The rest

of my family was in bits and pieces all over the house.'

Harry was crying silently. The Weasleys were his adopted family, and even though his Weasleys were safe, this Charlie's Weasleys had gone through what nobody should. The anger that boiled through him right then would have been more than enough to wipe out Voldemort and his entire army.

'I did the only thing I could: I ran. I found my parents' wands, took the money in the house, the broomstick, and left. I went Muggle, both to hide in case someone recognised me in the Wizarding World, and to honour my dad's bizarre obsession with Muggles. I needed something to remind me of them every day, you know?' he whispered.

'I was adopted and taken to Germany. Under the alias of Pavel Vorskratirov, I went to Durmstrang and graduated with honours. I was never a genius like Owl is, but I was hard-driven. I needed to be the best, so one day I could come back to Britain and avenge my family – and I will. I gave life to the Renegades,' he finished fiercely.

This was so wrong. The Charlie he had known had been laid-back, adventurous and was always ready for a laugh. He had been one of the finest Seekers Hogwarts had ever seen, one that Professor McGonagall talked about with pride in her voice. He had never been as magically gifted as Bill, but he had decided to go off and chase his dream in Romania, where he lived on a Dragon Reserve. The Charlie he had known had fought bravely at Hogwarts, but he wasn't the man standing in front of him. This Charlie was worn, he had dedicated his life to avenge the family Harry loved so much. This Charlie knew nothing of the joy Harry had experienced at the Burrow.

'I'm sorry,' Harry murmured.

Charlie shook his head. 'It's not your fault. But I expect you to blast that tosser.'

Harry nodded. The thoughts of what had happened to his erstwhile family there gave him enough anger to want to obliterate Voldemort right there.

'Charlie, I heard that Ginny had never been found -'

Charlie shook his head again, defeated. 'It's true that her body wasn't found. But she wasn't there. I knew she was dead when I saw Ginny's old teddy bear. I don't know how they did it, but they took something from her every child needs in order to survive: her magical core.'

Harry gasped.

'I don't know how they did it. One of the Lestrangle brothers must have done it, they are experts in that field. Ginny's teddy bear had her magic inside it, the magic turned it into a teddy bear that resembled her. Hair, freckles and everything. The bloody bastards turned her into a Muggle so she would suffer more. I know she is dead because no child born with magic can live without it. I spent years studying and hoping my sister would be alive, but there's no way a young child could have resisted the shock,' he finished. Luna had moved next to him and was patting him gently.

Hermione's story wasn't so soul-wrenching. After Voldemort had made his final move, she had fled to France. Her parents were against it, but she managed to convince them that learning magic and how to defend herself would be the only way she would survive. She didn't go to Beauxbatons, she was homeschooled by the most

brilliant tutors her parents could afford. She met Charlie “Dragon” Weasley when the first Renegades were on a mission in France, and ever since then she had been one of them.

‘But until I met Charlie, I never had any friends. I always had these bizarre dreams about a trio at Hogwarts, composed of Ron Weasley, Harry Potter and myself. Some of the dreams were scary, some were happy, and some were terrible. But I always had you two, and those dreams always gave me the happiness I needed to keep going on. I knew that at least there, I had friends who would be with me no matter what. And I was happy.’

-oOoOoOoOo-

Charlie “Dragon” Weasley, Hermione “Owl” Granger, Luna “Snorkack” Lovegood and your two favourite dimension travellers, Neville Longbottom and Harry Potter, arrived at the Chamber of Secrets, accompanied by their faithful sidekick Kreacher.

They had received a note from Dumbledore telling them to go to the Chamber as soon as humanly possible, they had some serious affairs to talk about. He had also requested they bring the Sword of Gryffindor. The note had only been for Harry and Neville – but Harry decided that it was best if the Hogwarts resistance had direct contact with the Renegades. He would also like to see their gobsmacked faces when they saw Neville, Luna, Hermione and Charlie.

It had been a very heated debate, deciding whether it was wise to reveal the identities of the three Renegades to the team at Hogwarts. In the end, Charlie won the argument by saying ‘we are from this dimension and we need their help. It’s not as if I were the long lost son of one of them or the last of the deceased Longbottom line.’

So with that, Harry led them to the Chamber of Secrets and waited for the bomb that was about to land on the people who were loyal to

Hogwarts. He couldn't wait for the look on McGonagall's face. In the end it turned out that Harry would have a bomb dropped on him, but I'm getting ahead of the times.

Owl and Hermione had one thing in common: their curiosity. During the time they spent waiting for Dumbledore, Aberforth, James, Sirius and Professor McGonagall to appear, she wouldn't sit down in her excitement. Instead, she inspected the place with the scholarly fervour his old Hermione had. It made Harry very sad that this Hermione never had the chance to dedicate her adolescent years to learn things for the sake of learning like his old Hermione did. Instead, all of her amazing brainpower was focused on how to survive the war.

He had never realised it before, but one of the reasons this war was so terrible was that it not only took lives, but it also took all the hopes and dreams of the good people in Britain. It was unforgivable.

A rush of flames indicated that the rest of the group had arrived. It was pretty neat that Fawkes could flame them all, because if not they would have been hindered by the Parseltongue hitch.

And that's when Harry had the surprise of his life. There was one extra person in that group. It was a boy, a couple of years younger than himself, with the same tousled hair, only a bit lighter, and hazel eyes that were staring at his surroundings in open disbelief. But what was so remarkable was that he could pass as Harry's twin.

Clung.

Harry Potter, meet your brother.

‘Sorry about the delay,’ Sirius said panting. ‘James here had a ruffle with his son. James didn't want him to come and be in the presence of the evil Gryffindor, but Michael refused to obey him.’

‘Michael? I thought his name was “Julian”, at least that’s what you called him’ Harry commented, confused. Did he have another brother?

James gave him a nasty smile. ‘I didn’t trust you then – and I still don’t trust you completely – so why would I endanger my only son by giving you his real name?’ he shot back.

Harry was hurt by that, but he wouldn’t allow himself to sulk. He really couldn’t blame James that much.

‘Hello? Michael is here if you hadn’t noticed’ Michael said, annoyed. Sitting down in front of Harry, he asked. ‘So, what’s your story? You are the reason Dad and Uncle Sirius are always arguing. Mind you, they would argue anyway, but you make much more of an interesting topic than “what kind of sandwich would you take to a deserted island?” He asked, smiling at Harry mischievously.

Harry decided then that he liked his brother. His little brother. It sounded foreign even in his mind, but so right at the same time. Harry was so happy under his hood that he thought that memory was one of his few Patronus-worthy memories. He had a brother!

‘I – I.. Well, it’s complicated. I’m just here to kick Voldemort’s arse, that’s all,’ Harry berated himself for that answer but hey, cut him some slack, he was just in front of his brother.

Michael grinned. ‘Alright, you called dibs on him. Then I’ll get Malfoy. That Death Eater looks too much like a nasty ferret. Always wanted to Transfigure him into one. I’m sure it’d be an improvement.’

Both Harry and Neville howled with laughter, no doubt remembering

the whole “Malfoy the Bouncing Ferret” episode in their Fourth Year.

Dumbledore coughed, interrupting their fun. Inside, he was glad Harry was laughing so freely like that.

Harry looked at him. ‘All right, Professor. All of you take your seats and we will begin this session,’ he said.

Some new couches had to be conjured to fit all of them. As they all sat, Harry sensed that the atmosphere was somewhat tense. The people he had brought in were very relaxed, but the Hogwarts team, save for Michael were ready to start throwing hexes around. To be honest, if Harry was to meet five people who were all dressed in black and looking all creepy and imposing, he would be tense too.

‘Okay, I don’t know the reason why you called this meeting, but I have brought three of the Renegades here. One, you already know, and it’s Snorkack right here by my side. The other two are Owl -’

‘Owl? The same Owl that managed to undo Voldemort’s Fidelius Charm on his settlement in Slytherin’s Lair, and trapped and sent to their deaths more than one hundred Death Eaters by Transfiguring the location into quicksand? That Owl?’ Sirius asked in awe, gazing at Hermione’s figure with utter respect.

Owl nodded curtly, but Harry was sure she was blushing under her hood. Harry, on the other hand, was a tad freaked out. He knew Hermione had the brilliance to do that, but he never knew she could be so deadly.

‘Yes, it’s the same Owl. And this Owl is currently working on getting your tattoos removed,’ Charlie said. ‘And if you wonder who I am, then you should know that I am Dragon. You also know me by the

name of Charlie Weasley,' he added, lowering his hood to reveal a freckly face with lots of red hair framing it.

Harry could hear Charlie's grin when the quiet reunion broke into 'what? No way! Are you serious?' (Yes, Sirius replied to that with one of his Sirius-serious puns.)

After the shock of realising that Charlie Weasley was alive and that he was the founder of the Renegades, seeing the faces of Hermione Granger and Luna Lovegood didn't surprise them that much. It was still shocking, of course, but nothing compared to finding the last of the Weasleys.

Harry and Neville, however, remained silent. They did feel like this was a moment for the rest of the team. They were strangers, after all, and even though they had read about what had happened here, it was not their world. They remained outsiders, somewhat detached. Harry would later acknowledge that part of his standoffish behaviour was due to the fact that his mind couldn't possibly assimilate that what was happening around him was real.

Michael, however astonished at the Renegades' appearance, was more interested in the two silent figures that stayed silent while the others rejoiced. There was something about them that was strange. Were they Renegades too? Were they something else? They couldn't be higher-ranking Renegades, since Charlie 'Dragon' Weasley was their leader. So who were they?

'So what about you two? Aren't you going to lower your hoods too?' he asked slyly.

Harry jerked. 'Er, no. Not now,' he replied uneasily.

'Why not?' James asked with a slight edge to his voice. 'Your

identity can't be more shocking than seeing Charlie Weasley!

Harry skirted around his seat while Neville looked simply uncomfortable.

‘James, let it go. Believe me, the identity of these two will be the most shocking thing you will ever face,’ Dumbledore told him gently. Turning to Harry, he said, ‘Gryffindor, you know you will have to stop hiding under your hood sometime soon. Especially after Voldemort realises his nemesis is back,’ he told him.

Harry cursed Dumbledore. That sure got everyone's attention, especially his little brother's. That kid seemed too observant to have the Potter genes. Were it not for the uncanny resemblance, Harry would have sworn that he couldn't be the brothers with such a kid.

‘The reason we called you here is because we retrieved the Diadem,’ Professor McGonagall said.

‘How?’ Harry asked, impressed at their speed.

James sighed dramatically. ‘My son has too much of the Marauder's genes inside him. He heard me and Sirius talking about it, and tried to retrieve it himself with the aid of a very special Potter heirloom,’ he growled at his son, who gazed back at him meekly. ‘Fortunately, we caught him before he tried anything by himself, or else I'd have no heir. We got into a heavy argument after that and Michael insisted he had a right to fight back in the only way he could, so he helped us plan how to get the Horcrux,’ James explained, ‘but he didn't take any active part on it. Between Sirius, Professor McGonagall and myself, we Confunded and attacked the patrolling Death Eaters, Obliviating them afterwards,’ said James, placing an arm over Michael's shoulders. ‘The reason he is here is because he felt

attending here was his right as one of the masterminds in the plan,' James finished, looking at his son reproachfully. Harry could see that behind that, James was immensely proud of his youngest son.

Michael ruffled his hair, making it even messier. 'Yeah well, I wanted to meet the guy that gets under my dad's skin. What can I say? Getting this from an insane horde of Death Munchers wasn't so difficult. I'm just brilliant like that,' he said haughtily, making the rest of the group laugh. 'Okay, jokes aside, why this diadem? I never took Voldemort for the girly type.'

Harry was impressed. Not only his brother was incredibly observant, but he was also as mischievous as hell. He had absolutely nothing to do with Harry's personality. He wondered if it was because for most of his life he had grown up in a loving family. Once again, Harry cursed Voldemort for taking his parents away from him.

'No, Voldemort isn't girly. Just really crazy,' Harry explained. 'I suppose it has something to do with being an evil villain. This diadem is also known as the "Diadem of Wisdom" and its rightful owner was once Rowena Ravenclaw.'

'Voldemort was the son of Tom Riddle and Merope Gaunt. The Gaunts, poor and insane due to inbreeding as they were, were the last descendants of the Slytherin line. The blood of the founders is still amongst us, but only the Slytherin line is easy to recognise -'

'Because of Parseltongue right? So that makes you a Gaunt, too?' Michael interrupted, his face pensive. 'I heard Uncle Sirius and Dad say that you were a Parselmouth,' he added apologetically.

Harry shook his head. 'No, I'm not a direct descendant. I'm an indirect one' he raised his hands in a sign of peace, 'before you start

going barmy over that statement, let me explain. Voldemort has the blood and special gift of the Slytherin family, I only have the gift. I received it when he killed my family but failed to kill me. His curse backfired and I got this gift,' he explained.

Harry didn't notice the looks he was receiving from Sirius, McGonagall and Aberforth.

'So, back to where I was. Lord Voldemort used his influence as the Heir of Slytherin to gather followers at school, blinded bigots who were lured to power and to the influence of one of the oldest and most famous families. Being the Heir of Slytherin enhanced his mystique.'

'But also, it's my belief that the happiest years of Voldemort's life, however twisted, were at Hogwarts. He came from an orphanage where he knew only pain, but in Hogwarts he found his home. He may have changed it into "Slytherin School", but Hogwarts remains the only public building in Great Britain that Voldemort hasn't destroyed.'

Neville was smiling under his hood. Listening to Harry explain Voldemort's story, and his rapt audience in front of him brought back memories from their Fifth Year in the DA. Dumbledore's Army was the turning point for Neville, and he would always be grateful to Harry for it.

'But apart from that, Rowena Ravenclaw, Salazar Slytherin, Helga Hufflepuff and Godric Gryffindor were four of the most talented witches and wizards Britain has ever had. If you think about it, what else would be good enough to keep one of the precious shards of Voldemort's soul?'

His audience was pensive. James and Sirius were clearly impressed with the deep knowledge and understanding he had of Voldemort, yet cautious about how he had gained such information. Professor McGonagall and Aberforth were too stunned to talk. Luna was as impassive as before, whereas Harry could see that Hermione's brain was going haywire. Charlie was grinning like a Cheshire cat, and Dumbledore was looking at Harry fondly, the kind of look a teacher would give his favourite student when he answered a very complicated question correctly.

Michael, as always, had to make Harry nervous. 'I suppose that you don't want to talk about how you understand Voldemort's mind so well, but how did you know where the diadem was?'

This kid was going to be the death of him. 'Er, I did my research very thoroughly.'

Michael looked like he didn't believe a word, but he let the matter rest.

'So, are there others? Do you know their location?' Professor McGonagall asked.

Harry nodded. 'Considering Voldemort loves symbolism, and considering that the most powerful magical number is seven, we can count on seven shards of Voldemort's soul in seven different vessels. The last one is the one that is still in his body, and that is the last one that must be destroyed. The first Horcrux he made was a diary, and is currently guarded at Malfoy Manor. The second is Slytherin's Locket, but you can take it off the list since it has already been destroyed. The third is Hufflepuff's Cup, in the vault of the Lestrangle Family. The fourth is the Re- a ring,' he corrected himself quickly, he didn't want Dumbledore dying again because of that Hallow, 'and it's inside the Gaunt's Shack. The fifth is the Diadem, which is about to be destroyed. The sixth I have doubts about it. Tell me, does

Voldemort carry around a snake all the time by the name of Nagini?’

The others shook their heads.

‘Then it’s our task to find out what the sixth Horcrux is, and where it’s kept.’ Harry finished, tired after that long explanation, and completely oblivious to the incredulous looks he was receiving.

‘So, can I destroy the Horcrux?’ Michael asked.

James and Sirius started protesting, but Harry reassured them Michael would be fine if he was under their watch. Harry got up and gave the sword to his brother, while placing the diadem on the floor.

‘Michael, listen to me and listen very carefully. I don’t know if you have ever had the dubious pleasure of interacting with Voldemort in person, but if you haven’t, make no mistake – this is Voldemort. What is inside of this diadem is as sentient as you, and it will try to break you so that you won’t destroy it. It’s not a toy, it’s the real Voldemort inside,’ Harry told his brother seriously.

Michael nodded grimly, all sorts of heroic deeds and adventures wiped from his mind. He didn’t know who that stranger was, but he trusted his authority on the Voldemort topic. If it was that serious, he would have to concentrate.

‘I’m ready,’ he said, determined to destroy a part of the wizard who had ruined so many lives.

Harry nodded and turned to the diadem. ‘Open,’ he hissed in Parseltongue, ignoring the gasps of the rest of the group.

The shadowy figure of a twenty-something Voldemort arose from inside the diadem. It was not the handsome Riddle that came out of the diary, nor was it the disfigured one that used to reside inside the locket. It was the echo of the Voldemort that went to Dumbledore's office to ask for the Defence Against the Dark Arts post, when he jinxed the job after the Headmaster refused to hire him. He was still Tom Riddle, he hadn't undergone the many obscure rituals that transformed him into the snake-like Voldemort, but his features were already waxy and distorted. All in all, it was a creepy sight.

‘Michael Potter. I know of your heart's desire and I can give it to you. You have always wanted your brother Harry back; together we can. Let me channel my power through you and Harry will be with you forevermore,’ Voldemort hissed softly, while Michael stared at the smoky figure in a stunned silence.

Harry's heart broke at that. If only Michael knew that his brother was a couple of feet away. But they had to concentrate! This was Voldemort! Shaking off his sadness, Harry yelled ‘Michael! Concentrate! Nothing can bring back the dead! Kill it!’

Voldemort turned to Harry, leaving the still gobsmacked Michael alone. Changing from English to Parseltongue, he said ‘ah, the prodigal son returns, I should have expected you wouldn't stay put, would you? Now why doesn't your brother know that you are here? Should I-’

‘Oh quit with the hissy fit, why won't you? You are worse than Pansy Parkinson!’ Michael yelled and struck the sword on the centre of the diadem.

Voldemort screamed and withered, but in the end, he was gone, leaving a sweaty Michael smiling goofily.

Harry couldn't help it, he went to congratulate his brother, pride running through his veins, while the rest of the group hugged and congratulated Michael and cheered because another shard of Voldemort had been destroyed. Point for the Hogwarts team.

While everyone was talking about the piece of soul that had just been destroyed Michael snuck out and sat next to Harry.

‘You must have a very good reason if you are hiding your true self, a reason that probably involves my dad and Sirius,’ Michael said quietly while Harry looked at him flabbergasted. ‘Yes, I have noticed that you are very patient with those two, even if they don't fully trust you and are sometimes mean to you. That means they are important to you.’

Michael was talking very quietly, but Harry knew this was difficult for him. ‘I know that you aren't Remus. You aren't my mum either. I don't know who you are, but I trust you fully. Call me rash, but you have more than proven yourself to me.’

‘I inferred that you must be someone Voldemort thinks dead, and one very powerful and dangerous enemy to him. I understand the reason for your secrecy. I know I'm just a kid but I hope that one day you'll trust me enough to tell me the story behind you,’ Michael finished quietly and rose to his feet, leaving Harry alone with his thoughts.

Later, Harry realised that Michael must have taken after his mother. He was calm and collected and incredibly intelligent, he had none of the recklessness he and his father shared. All in all, his little brother was a pretty amazing kid. Harry would love to have a brother-brother relationship with him, but how to explain to him that he was the Harry he had never known? And what about James and Sirius, how would they take it? Would they accept him or would they refuse him? It

pained Harry to no end.

‘Gryffindor, come over here!’ Charlie yelled.

‘What is it?’ Harry asked, still musing about what to do with the Potter family.

‘Owl tracked down one of the Death Eater’s safe houses. We need you and Avenger to be prepared, we are attacking them one week from today,’ Charlie informed him, grinning at the thought of cracking some Death Eater skulls open.

‘All right.’

‘Also, I have to add that I have tracked down a very important Secret Keeper,’ Dumbledore chirped merrily. ‘I have good news. Soon enough we will have two very dear members back with us: Remus Lupin and Lily Potter.’

Harry’s cover would have been blown if anyone present had seen the look of utter joy that spread on his face at the news of his mum and former professor coming back.

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DISCLAIMER: do I could manage to convince JKR to pass the HP rights onto me as a birthday gift?

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A/N: Sorry for the long wait! I hope you enjoyed the chapter! Review,

review, review!

As usual, for any of you that might be interested, there's a link to my Yahoo! Group on my profile page, the address is:

<http://groups dot yahoo dot com forward slash group forward slash Vermouth underscore Fanfiction>

Until next time,

Vermouth

Member of the Siriusan Order

REVISED by my talented beta-reader Hasufel: 22/05/2009

Chapter Eleven

Unmentionable Number Three: Aphrodite

As the week prior to the attack on the Death Eater settlement at Slytherin's Lair went by, Harry found that he enjoyed being in the company of Owl and Charlie, no matter how twisted and bizarre it still was for him.

However, Harry was unsettled. In just a few days' time, they would be attacking a camp of Death Eaters, a real live camp swarming with Voldemort's forces. Hell, maybe even the supreme Snake Chump would be there, too. Owl didn't think it likely, since Voldemort was very busy trying to blow up the planet; but this is Voldemort we are talking about. However, Owl did say that the chances of finding one of the Unnameables were high.

That did get Harry very anxious. Out of all of Voldemort's elite, the one that unnerved him the least was Number Five, Ares. He seemed like the bookworm type from what he had heard. But finding him in the camp was as likely as Voldemort committing suicide. Ares was his stooge-boy, he planned missions for Voldemort. He was said to be an accomplished duellist, but he was not a prodigy.

Apollo wasn't the worst of the Unnameables; in fact, he sounded very much like one Draco Malfoy – only deadlier. If he had to fight him, he would; but that didn't mean he was all eager to do so.

Aphrodite sounded like Bellatrix Lestrange. No matter how many times he was told that Bellatrix couldn't be Aphrodite, he didn't believe it. From what he had heard, Aphrodite and Bella were so similar they must be the same person. Call Harry mental, but one part of him was apprehensive about fighting against her, and the other part was looking forward to it. Last time, it was Mrs Weasley who had taken Bellatrix down; this time, if Neville didn't protest, Harry would be the one sending her six feet under.

The Unnameable Number Two, Hades, was a puzzle to Harry. What did he do with the bodies? Could he be into some sort of necrophilia – the thought of that wanted to make Harry throw up all the food he had eaten during the past ten years – or could he be saving lives? Harry quickly dismissed the second option. This was the Elite, they wouldn't be double-crossers.

But Artemis, the Unnameable Number One, that girl he didn't want to meet. She seemed even worse than Voldemort. Riddle liked to brag and, blinded by his own prowess, he tended to make very silly mistakes. Mistakes that had saved Harry's life several times since that fateful night in 1981. But Artemis didn't brag. She was silent, she was the huntress. She was Voldemort's daughter.

Thinking about the Elite force gave Harry headaches. He couldn't for the life of him decipher what to do about them. Harry was an incredibly powerful wizard and a superb duellist, but until he had seen their style, he couldn't even plan a strategy to bring those five down.

Harry admitted that he should've thought that things wouldn't be the same in the two dimensions. It had been silly of him to ever suppose that. And now the sixth Horcrux was proof of that. If they didn't find what and where it was, they would be doomed. Harry thought that Voldemort may have made a Horcrux out of Artemis, since she was also a Parselmouth, but wouldn't that be extremely foolhardy, even for Voldemort?

He had made Nagini his Horcrux when Pettigrew found him at the end of Harry's third year at Hogwarts. In Harry's opinion, that had been a very hasty and unwise decision. Well, unwise for Voldemort, lucky for Harry. But back to the point; Nagini was a living being, not as complicated and difficult as humans, but still a living entity. As such, unless Nagini had Horcruxes of herself, she would eventually die. The thought of a snake having Horcruxes was so absurd it left

Harry laughing for a long while.

Even though everything pointed at Artemis being the final Horcrux, Harry had doubts about it. Would Voldemort really be so reckless so as to implant one of his precious soul shards inside a person who risked her life with every mission he gave her? Harry didn't think so, especially because he hadn't been in the picture this time. Back in his world, Voldemort had been obsessed with him, and chose Nagini as his Horcrux so he could carry on with his evil plans to become the supreme ruler of the universe and doing Harry in. But this world posed no real threat to Voldemort, seeing that the "Chosen One" was pushing daisies. So there was no reason for hasty decisions.

Harry shook his head. Now was not the time to think about that. He had to focus on preparing for the attack. He needed to clear his mind and beat some Death Eaters to a pulp.

Most of the Renegades in Cherry Lane, plus Neville and Harry, were duelling to get ready for the attack; some were duelling in pairs, some were practising against dummies. The reason was that those who wanted to practise against a real live opponent worked in pairs, but they were banned from firing anything deadlier than Stunners or Stinging Hexes. Practising against a real person gave them speed, agility and a somewhat real battle experience. Par contre, those who chose to try deadlier techniques practised against magical dummies. Harry understood the reason for it, especially after he witnessed Owl's special "Purple Rain" Curse on a dummy.

Harry watched, amazed, as she pointed her wand at the dummy and did some sort of circular movement with her wand. Two circles, if Harry had been fast enough to catch the movement. Then a tendril of purple fire spiralled around the body, encasing it and burning it. As a final touch, the fire spiral around the body shifted into purple blades, which dug into the body. Needless to say, that curse could be messy if practised on a living being; on a dummy, it only made one hell of a mess of cotton and fabric. Also note that Owl had one hell of a dark

sense of humour.

‘Your turn now, Gryffindor,’ she said brightly. ‘Let’s see how well you do against one of the dummies. You’ll work on speed and agility later with one of our own, Renegade Princess Pingyang. She is working with Neville right now,’ Owl added. ‘Questions?’

Harry nodded. ‘Yes, two. First, is she a real princess?’ he inquired, apprehensive at the thought of attacking royalty. Who knew if her father the King would come and behead him for attacking his daughter?

Owl laughed. ‘No, she isn’t. She chose that name to honour a princess of old; one who, in a time when women were seen as mere child-bearers, went to battle for her father and killed many enemies. It’s quite fitting for her.’

Harry sighed in relief. ‘Alright. Question number two. Rules for the “game”?’

‘No rules,’ she said, ‘the deadlier and faster you are, the better your chances of surviving.’ Owl smirked and commented in an undertone, ‘So show us what the Chosen One is made of.’

Harry growled. He hated that nickname, almost as much as he hated “The-Boy-Who-Lived”.

Harry rose to his feet and faced the warning those who were close by to move away in case it got nasty, he turned his wrist, oblivious to the looks he was getting, and his glowing red wand came out

His face hidden under his special robes, he bowed to his silent opponent. Let the show begin.

‘Fractum!’ he yelled, putting in an average amount of energy and pointing at the dummy’s knee. The dummy stepped backwards, but its leg didn’t break as it was supposed to. Interesting, the dummies were magic resistant. Harry shot another Bone-Breaking Curse at its head, but the dummy only wobbled until it set itself straight again.

Harry circled around it, and to his surprise, the dummy moved. They seemed to be semi-sentient. Whoever had created these dummies had done a brilliant job. Owl, most likely.

Harry smirked. Time to use more power in his attack. ‘Aqua!’

His supercharged Conjuring Spell created a massive ball of water in front of him, and before the dummy could pull any other tricks, he sent the ball of water at it. ‘Custôdiae!’ The dummy was locked inside a prison of water.

Grinning, Harry pocketed his wand. That hadn’t been too difficult. At least, it hadn’t been too difficult until someone tapped on his shoulder. He turned around, expecting to see Owl, only to find a small herd on ten dummies, one of which, the closest to him, punched him. For a thing made of wool and cotton, the dummy sure packed a punch.

‘Oh crud,’ he cursed. He would really have to pull some neat tricks. ‘Âter aestus flagellum!’ he murmured with a grim resolution. A giant black fire whip appeared by his side; ignoring the gasps of the crowd, he waved his wand and shot the whip at two dummies in the background.

The other dummies didn’t stand still. As soon as Harry attacked the two dummies with the Black Fire Whip Curse, the others became sentient and started walking towards him like an angry mob. Harry had to control the whip, which had now burnt the two dummies, and defeat the eight dummies that were closing in on him. He waved the

whip again, and another dummy got caught in it.

They were getting too close. His right hand controlling the whip, waiting for the third dummy to be burnt to ashes (who knew if the thing would get up again if not?), Harry lifted his left hand, 'Magia dêprômô!' He didn't wait to see the results of his spell. 'Lacerus!' he yelled at another dummy, supercharging his spell and taking two down.

More dummies appeared. 'Damnit!'

'Cordis eruptio! Impedimenta! Atlas fractum!' He pulled the whip over his head and threw it at another dummy, blasting to smithereens. He crouched and rolled over, and shot an Entrail Expelling Curse at the nearest dummy before he got up. He conjured a ball of light in his palm and sent it at another of the dummies from there, while he waved the whip at another one.

Keeping the whip alive was taking its toll on Harry. He swished his wand and it disappeared. He pocketed his wand, quickly raising a small ward in front of him to prevent the dummies from reaching him, and another ward to protect the rest of the Renegades. He then pressed his palms together. Concentrating as hard as he could, he called forth his magic while whispering 'Aura Mortis'. Pulling every bit of strength he had, he slowly separated his hands.

He could hear the gasps of disbelief when soft black tendrils appeared between his palms, emitting a low hissing sound. When Harry grasped the ends of the wisps and tore them in two, the temperatures dropped and the hissing from the black threads in his palms became furious.

If he didn't attack a dummy soon, the strands would attack him. He placed his hands at his sides, palms wide open, sweating from the effort of controlling "the Breath of Death". He nodded and the ward

that separated him from the dummies fell down.

‘NOW!’ he yelled. The black tendrils shot furiously from his hands at the dummies, puncturing each dummy several times on the chest, howling madly with each “death”. With each stab, the strand remained inside and went to another dummy. It wasn’t a pretty picture.

Harry cancelled the spell when all of the dummies were on the floor and turned around to lower the ward behind him, panting.

Really, he should have expected it. The crowd gathered behind was looking at him in awe and fear. Not only he had displayed an enormous amount of magical power, but he had done it wandless. Way to go, Harry. Also, he had used one spell only a real powerful wizard such as Voldemort could control without killing himself. Plus, it was one of the darkest spells around, highly illegal, highly deadly, and highly painful.

To his surprise, Charlie was the first to break out of his reverie and went to pat his back, exhilarated. ‘That was brilliant, Gryffindor! Can’t wait till you pull that one on Moldysorts!’ He cheered, ignoring the fear that had spread through the hearts of his followers.

Harry smiled feebly at him.

Owl approached him gingerly. ‘Where did you learn that spell? Supposedly, Voldemort created it during the first war, and he never said the incantation aloud,’ she said, half scared at the sheer power she had witnessed, half annoyed at not knowing the answer to that puzzle.

Harry laughed, making half of the crowd cringe. ‘He really said that?’ he laughed again and shook his head. ‘This spell was created by one of the Headmasters at Hogwarts in the thirteenth century, Pollux

Black. It was so dangerous and lethal it was banned and eventually forgotten. Voldemort did not create it,' he explained. 'Never took Voldemort for a fraud. Guess you never really get to know a person,' he added, shaking his head in amusement.

'How did you come across this information?' she asked. Harry could practically see the cogs in her head.

He smiled mischievously. 'Wouldn't you like to know?' he teased. 'Come, I have a certain princess to meet.'

Charlie laughed merrily while Harry pulled a disgruntled Owl with him, leaving the crowd in stunned silence.

Nobody ever noticed the calculating looks that followed Harry.

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"Princess Pingyang" turned out to be Harry's erstwhile crush: Cho Chang. He wasn't sure if Owl had done it on purpose. Fortunately, she didn't know who he was, since he was wearing the robes that hid his face between a smoky black veil. Well, to be entirely truthful, it was not as if Harry had a puff of black smoke obscuring his sight. It was an illusion for the rest of the world, Harry could see as clearly as he would've done without those robes.

'You did quite a neat job on those dummies, Gryffindor,' Cho said, arranging her combat boots. 'My rank is not high enough to know your real identity, but if you ever feel too burdened by the weight of keeping that particular secret, I'm always here,' she smirked.

Harry laughed. He liked this Cho better than the one he used to know. 'Oh, thank you, your Majesty.'

Cho grinned. 'So, ready to have your arse royally kicked?'

He rolled his eyes. 'Not another pun-loving fiend, please!'

This world's Cho turned out to be really fast. The speed with which she rolled and turned and shot Stunners and Stinging Hexes at him was most impressive. She seemed born to dodge and twist. Harry was very fast, but he had to give into Cho's superior skills. He barely had time to dodge her volleys of curses, let alone fire any hexes at her.

He realised soon enough that he wasn't a match for her, so he decided to change his tactics. He confused her by pulling his wand back into his sleeve.

'What are you doing?' she asked nervously, firing another round of curses at Harry.

Harry smirked under his hood. He ducked and rolled, twisted and turned. He was focusing on defending himself instead of attacking – but at the same time, with every dodge, he was getting closer to her.

He was enjoying this fight very much, he thought, as he began to close the small distance between them. He was so glad now that Kingsley had taught him more than just magical combat. Grinning like a Cheshire cat, barely a foot away, Harry prepared himself.

Cho kept shooting curses at him, getting more and more nervous as she saw him approach her. She tried to pull backwards, but he was fast. She never saw it coming when he ducked and stuck out his leg to make her fall. Harry had always wanted to try something à la "Sweep the Leg".

Harry took out his wand again and placed it on Cho's neck. 'Do you

yield?’

Cho laughed merrily.

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The morning before the attack found Harry sitting on a chair on one of the balconies in the Renegade House. It had taken him quite a long time to notice, but once he did, Harry found himself deeply troubled. He had changed, and not for the better.

It had started off slowly and innocuously enough. He had begun studying the different branches of magic. He had been wary of them, but he also had a grim determination to learn what he could in order to survive a second war. He had never been the studious type, but he admitted that, considering how unbelievably unprepared he had been, it had been nothing short of a miracle that he had bested Voldemort in the Battle of Hogwarts. But he couldn't always count on luck, could he?

Looking up at the cloudy skies, he smiled grimly. They reflected his mood so well. It had been so innocent at first: reading books of magic, practising new techniques, being tutored by Kingsley... that is, until he received the Headmasters' Ring, a Rowena Ravenclaw invention. He glanced at his hand where the wretched thing was. It was nothing special, just a simple ring, nothing ostentatious or terribly visible. But it had changed him without him even noticing it. Dumbledore had thought that it was just Light Magic from the previous Headmasters, but it wasn't like that at all.

It was subtle at first. He had been knocked out from the sheer magical force that slammed his brain. After he woke up, he felt as if some part of his brain had gone all blurry. Perhaps that was how people with amnesia felt: he knew it was there, only he couldn't retrieve it. But as each day passed, bits of knowledge from centuries past had started popping up in his brain. Spells he and the rest of the

population had never heard of, and yet he understood them as completely as if he had studied each for a very long time - including the darkest of the Dark Arts.

Dumbledore had been right banning the Dark Arts from Hogwarts. Prior to him, some of the Headmasters such as Dippet frowned upon them, but most of them were still legal. Other Headmasters had been blatantly biased in favour of them. Pollux Black, the creator of the Breath of Death, was only one out of a huge set of dark wizards who rose to the headmaster position at Hogwarts. He had read about their lives afterwards, and was surprised to find that many of them had ended up either crazy or murderers. And now he had all of their knowledge inside his brain, the same knowledge that drove them insane and cruel.

He had never truly noticed the changes on him until he duelled those dummies in front of the Renegades. The Golden Boy of Gryffindor would have got sick at that display, but the new Harry Potter didn't; he even felt exhilarated after using Aura Mortis on those dummies. Dumbledore's favourite student carried the guilt from cursing Draco Malfoy in his sixth year, even though he hadn't known about the effects of the Sectumsempra. The guilt of nearly killing someone, no matter if it was that poncy git, rested heavily on him. This Harry Potter had left a man to die after he had kept him as a prisoner bound and gagged inside his trunk.

He barely recognised himself now. He was so aggressive, he was using the Dark Arts more than he used Light Magic. Granted, Expelliarmus wouldn't get him that far this time, but was it really necessary for him to change this much? Would Dumbledore approve of it? Would Lily and James be proud of what Harry was turning into?

Harry's thoughts shifted to Voldemort. His and the Dark Lord's upbringing had been very similar, to a certain extent. They had not known what a loving family was. Until Harry met the Weasleys, he had never been accepted for what he was. They had been called

“freaks”, shunned for their unnaturalness. When they turned eleven, a miracle happened for both of them: they got their Hogwarts letter, they had been accepted into Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry – they were wizards. They had a new place in the world, far away from their rotting pseudo-homes. They had been given a second chance.

Harry had never realised before just how lucky he had been for meeting Ron on the Hogwarts’ Express. Ron, although immature and awed by Harry’s scar, had welcomed him and given his friendship to him from the start. He had been sorted into Gryffindor, and had been widely accepted by all of the residents in Gryffindor Tower. True, his Boy-Who-Lived status had helped, but even the unknown students were welcomed with open arms.

He didn’t think Voldemort had had it that easy. He came from an unknown background with an unknown name and was sorted into Slytherin. There, bearing in mind that Tom Riddle seemed like a Muggleborn, he had probably been ostracised from the very first moment he stepped foot in the House of the Snake. When Harry thought about it, it was probably then that Tom Riddle started dying and Voldemort began to take over. Tom Riddle’s dreams and hopes must’ve been crushed, and so the future Lord Voldemort began, friendless and alone, cruel and with no respect towards human life.

But that hadn’t been Harry’s case. Harry had friends and people who liked him for who he was. But now he was in this forsaken place, with nobody that really knew him. Yes, Neville was around now, but he was still too awed by the fact that he was in another world.

Harry knew about the soul-corrupting effects the Dark Arts had. What worried him even more was before Voldemort had died in the Battle of Hogwarts, Harry had been a capable wizard, but nothing in the league of the Dark Lord or Dumbledore. But now he was. The magical power inside his body was tremendous; he could feel it each time he moved his fingers.

Harry was alone, powerful, and giving into the Dark Arts. He had never realised that, very slowly, he could become something similar to Voldemort. That thought scared him more than anything else in the world.

‘Nervous about tonight’s attack?’ said a voice behind him, breaking his line of thought.

Harry turned around and saw Owl smiling kindly at him. He shook his head. ‘No, just thinking about stuff.’

She sat next to him in silence. He could hear her steady breathing beside him. She had been tremendously helpful since he had been with the Renegades, even if they did have a rocky start. He glanced sideways at her. Owl had her eyes closed and looked relaxed, as if she were enjoying the chill morning breeze on her face. But her eyebrows were slightly furrowed and her mouth was too tight.

Opening her eyes, Owl saw the furtive looks she was getting from Harry and smiled. ‘You shouldn’t worry too much, Harry. You’ll do great. Everyone is impressed with you. Squeamish is so happy he has been bouncing up and down for the past week.’

Harry stared at her and sighed. ‘It’s not that, Owl. It’s just – I don’t know. I’m changing, and I don’t think I like it.’

Owl arched an eyebrow. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I used to be so naïve it was ridiculous. I was Dumbledore’s poster-boy, the incarnation of the Gryffindor values,’ he started, laughing mirthlessly at his past innocent self. ‘But now everything has changed. When did I start using the Dark Arts like mere Wingardium Leviosa’s? When did I start enjoying destroying

dummies like as if it were a game?' he asked, revealing his inner struggle.

Owl sat up, a cross expression on her face. 'Listen Harry, and listen well. We are at war. If you see a Death Eater, blast him. You say it as if your display of magic the other day was a bad thing,' she said sternly, 'and it isn't. It's wonderful news. We now have two immensely powerful wizards on our side, and that has increased our odds. But we are still vastly outnumbered. Even though we're the good guys, this isn't a fair fight and we cannot allow ourselves to follow the Gryffindor principles,' she continued, a slightly derisive tone in her voice. 'You can't go soft on the Death Eaters, because I promise you that they won't go soft on you. We will risk our lives for you, but you must pull yourself together and stop this nonsense right now. Otherwise, we are already dead,' she concluded, pulling herself to rest again on her chair and enjoy the chilly morning in Britain.

Harry's eyes were wide open in shock. He realised that no matter how much they looked alike and how scarily brilliant they were, Owl was not Hermione. Same as Dragon wasn't Charlie and Snorkack wasn't Luna. He had deluded himself into thinking that his friends were back. They weren't. These were different people who happened to have the same bodies and faces, but that was it. Hermione was his friend, but Owl was a warrior. Hermione would have never said that end justified the means, but Owl was clearly of that opinion.

He couldn't blame Owl, she was extremely gifted at what she did and she had been fighting everyday for the past seven years of her life. Criticising her would be unfair and stupid. She was a high-ranking member amongst the Renegades and had gone through hardships Harry couldn't even begin to imagine.

But Harry wasn't like that. Harry couldn't afford not setting himself some restrictions. Harry realised that he now needed his friends more than ever.

-oOoOoOoOo-

‘You should have some rest Harry, it’s going to be a long night,’ Neville said, watching Harry pacing up and down. Neville was worried about Harry, but didn’t know how to express it.

Harry smiled sadly and plopped on a couch. They had been with the Renegades for the past week, and Neville and Harry had been given a room to share. Inside it, with Dragon’s permission, Harry placed several wards so that only Owl, Dragon, Snorkack, Neville and himself could enter the room. It was the only place where he could lower his hood and be Harry, not Gryffindor.

‘It’s just that – oh, I don’t know. We are going to raid a Death Eater settlement tonight; we are actively attacking them, instead of the usual defending. I just can’t wrap my head around it, you know?’ he asked, more to himself than to Neville.

Neville nodded absent-mindedly. ‘I agree. It’s not what we are used to. I guess that is because of how things turned out here. Who knew not having a moody midget in glasses around would be so catastrophic?’ Neville asked with a feeble attempt at humour.

Harry grinned. ‘Hey! I’m not that tiny anymore. You should know that I am considered “tall” now. So there.’ He could’ve stuck out his tongue just then, but that would be way too out of character. The grin left Harry’s face. ‘Sometimes I wonder if they actually know what they are fighting for, or if it’s just the everyday routine. They are almost as ruthless as any Death Eater. I know they are the “good guys”, but I just don’t want to end up like them, you know?’ he asked rhetorically.

‘Yeah, I get it,’ Neville said, grimacing. ‘The thing is - this is a war, and this time we are the unfavoured side, so the tactics this time

must be different than last time. The Renegades is a big force, but they are nothing against the army Voldemort has been able to gather throughout his years in power.' He sighed. 'This place is so screwed up.'

Harry laughed. 'Yeah, that about sums it up alright.'

Neville furrowed his eyebrows. 'The thing is - and this is something I always wondered - what should we do? I don't want to kill anyone, but considering our odds, it appears I will have to do so if I want to live to tell the tale. We are so outnumbered that Stunning Death Eaters just won't do this time. But do I want to lose myself by becoming a killing machine? No, I don't. So I just don't know what to do.'

Harry nodded. 'Agreed. I have seen what has become of Hermione, and I don't like it. She is supposed to use her enormous brainpower to baffle the rest of the world with her brilliance, not devise plans and techniques and hexes to torture and maim Death Eaters...' Harry finished, punching the couch in frustration.

'Yeah, she's very different. It's not her fault, obviously. But I don't like it either. It's just so wrong. Same with Charlie. Snorkack? She is a quaint as our Luna, but she has a maniac and dangerous glint in her eye Luna lacked. Can we blame them? No, we can't. But that doesn't mean we have to like it. Just,' Neville added, with a slight apprehensive tone in his voice, 'look, I know we will have to be efficient against the Death Eaters and I know that you were holding back the other day, but I only ask you to not use the Cruciatus Curse, okay?'

Harry smiled. He had never been so glad that Neville was there with him, another stranger in an Unholy Land. 'You can count on it, mate. I hate the Unforgivables. Been too much at their receiving end to like them.'

‘Thanks, Harry. Oh, and leave Bellatrix to me.’

Harry laughed.

-oOoOoOoOo-

The team was composed of all of the Renegades in Cherry Lane save for Dragon. He had wanted to go with them, but Owl had convinced him in the end to leave for another Renegade house. Losing Charlie wouldn't be as magically devastating as losing Harry, but Harry was a secret weapon whereas Dragon was the leader of the Renegades. If something happened to him, the Renegades would fall.

Harry knew most of the members of the raid, even if he had never talked to them. At least he knew them by name, since most of them hid under their hoods while he was around.

They were all preparing to leave for the attack. Harry waited for them, sitting on a couch near the entrance and trying to stay as calm as he could. The truth be told, Harry was a nervous wreck.

‘Excited about the attack, Gryffindor?’ someone said.

Harry looked up to see the newcomer; Cho “Princess Pingyang” Chang. Harry was shocked to see how different she looked. Cho was wearing some tight elastic-looking leggings and a shirt, all black of course, and her combat boots seemed made of the thickest dragon-hide Harry had ever seen. She had a robe over that, but the hood was pulled down. It was her hair that seemed so out of place. Instead of pulling up some simple ponytail or whatever girls felt more comfortable with, she had the most intricate bun on her head Harry had ever seen. It was oriental-looking, metallic chopsticks included

and all, and would have not been out of place at the Yule Ball. But for a raid? Harry rolled his eyes. Girls.

‘No. I’m bloody nervous.’

‘You shouldn’t be. They are fun,’ Cho said merrily.

‘Fun? How could you consider killing people fun? And what about the lives of the Renegades? You know not all of you will come back!’ Harry nearly yelled.

Cho shrugged. ‘You get used to it. You learn never to get close enough to anyone so that you would miss them if they died. Sooner or later we will all die anyway. So if we are to snuff it, why not take as many Death Eaters as we can with us?’ she asked, completely serious.

Harry stared at her. ‘You have problems.’

She laughed. ‘And you are too serious. I need to go and check in with my Captain. See you later!’ she waved merrily at him, disappearing through a door.

That statement was yet another proof of how messed up this world was. So messed up Harry thought that even if they won the war, many changes would have to be made to bring things back onto the right track. He promised himself that no matter what happened, he was not going to become like them.

Shaking off his feelings about them and their lack of respect for human life, Harry went back to thinking about the raid. Just what the hell was he supposed to do? Was there even a purpose to this raid? Or was it just to kill off Death Eaters? And what did they expect from

him? Flashy lights and a huge death toll behind his back? Wouldn't it be better if he kept his abilities hidden until the final showdown with Voldemort?

‘Keep thinking like that and you'll be easy prey for Snorkack's Wrackspurts.’

Harry smiled. ‘I think I have been possessed by Wrackspurts too many times already. What's once more?’ he asked, looking up at Owl.

She shook her head lightly and sat down next to him. Harry could see that she was wearing the same sort of attire that Cho was, but Owl had knives in sheaths tied to her hip and thighs. Harry bet there were more inside her boots and arms. It was downright scary.

‘We are all set to leave. Dragon and Squeamish are the only ones staying here, so they are giving the rest of the team a pep talk. You know, to cheer them up and all of that. To give them motivation.’

‘So why aren't you there?’ Harry asked curiously.

‘I have had too much of his pep talks. They just drag on and on,’ Owl answered sheepishly.

Harry laughed. ‘That does remind me of Oliver Wood, the Crazy Quidditch Fan. Used to wake us up at five A.M. to give us one of his talks. Never managed to get through one without falling asleep at some point.’

‘Oliver Wood? He is a Renegade, but not of this House. He is a

Captain too, and very strict with his team. From what I have heard, he can be a nightmare. Makes them get up at the crack of dawn to jog around the house.'

He grinned. That was just so like Oliver. Good to know that some things remained the same. Changing the topic, Harry said, 'So where is the raid? Anything I need to know?'

Owl shook her head. 'No, you will arrive via Portkey. We don't tell the Renegades where they are going until they are already there. Safety precaution, Gryffindor. I was the one who tracked down this settlement, so only Dragon and I know where it is. What you need is to attack as efficiently as you can,' she explained quickly. Lowering her voice, she said, 'Please don't hold back, Harry. Attack them with everything you have.'

Harry nodded in grim defeat. He would get his hands stained with blood that night. He wondered why the Renegade leaders were so paranoid that they didn't tell the rest of their team where they were going. Wouldn't that handicap the team? Shouldn't they be learning about the way the Death Eaters were placed?

Then again, Harry realised that, after having watched them trained, they were ready for almost any sort of Death Eater formation. Also, remembering what had happened to his parents because they had trusted one of their old school friends, Harry admitted that it made sense. That way, their raid wouldn't be foiled because of a traitor. Even if there were such a double-crosser that would alert Voldemort of a raid, he wouldn't be able to tell him where it would take place.

Another question popped up in Harry's brain. 'Okay, so why are you carrying so many knives?'

Owl smiled wickedly. 'You never know if Artemis will be there,' and with that statement, she stood up and left.

Soon enough, it was time for Harry, Neville and the Renegades to leave. They were all dressed in the same robes, black from head to toe. Harry panicked briefly. If the Renegades were dressed in Black and so were the Death Eaters, then how would he separate friend from foe?

Ah, he then remembered one detail. Death Eaters wore masks. The Renegades had opted for a very freaky alternative. While the hood was simple cloth over their heads, their faces were another story. Where a normal visage should've been, there was only black void with two specks of white light where the eyes were. Just like zombies. Downright creepy. Then again, black smoke covered his face, so he wasn't one to talk.

‘Alright team,’ Owl spoke, ‘we are ready. Squeamish is handing over the Portkeys. As soon as we all have our own Portkey, say “activate”. In case you are injured or if one of your team has fallen down, put yourselves or your fallen comrade under a Stasis Spell. I’ll be erecting anti-Apparition and anti-Portkey wards as soon as we get there, so nobody gets in or out until it’s all over. All clear?’ she asked, while placing the Portkey – a bracelet – around her wrist. With renewed fervour, she pumped up her fist and cried ‘To battle!’

‘TO BATTLE!’ the mass shouted.

Harry glanced at Neville and the both nodded at each other. ‘ACTIVATE!’

Floomp.

Harry landed on the soft grass. Standing up, it looked like they were in a forest. It was very dark, so he didn’t know just how big it was, but it did look like a very thick forest. He saw a figure beckoning them in silence – Owl, he supposed – so he walked up to where they were

gathering.

Owl cast a few privacy wards, just like the ones Hermione had created when she, Ron and Harry had been “camping”. Once she was done, she started speaking. ‘We are in the largest islands in Loch Lomond, Inchmurrin, also know in Gaelic Scottish as “Innis Mheadhran”. That bit of information is only important because of this: Innis Mheadhran Stage Two Camp is located on Inchmurrin Island,’ she said, pronouncing each syllable very slowly. Harry supposed it was so the Fidelius could be thwarted. ‘This island is very small, and it’s basically empty. As H.V. Morton said, it’s a “grassy isle, packed with memories,” she explained, making Harry smile softly. This Owl was still a magnificent source of information.

‘The isle belongs to the Scott family, and the population is mostly Muggle. The Death Eaters have formed a camp on the southern borders of this forest. The Fidelius Charm is now officially broken – at least for us – so you will have no problems finding it. This is a Death Eater settlement used for training. From the information Dragon and I gathered, it has eighty-nine recruits. Before you start protesting,’ she continued, raising a hand to calm the Renegades, ‘you should remember that this is a Stage Two camp, so they are basically newbies, but one day they will become fully-fledged Death Eaters - so don’t go soft on them. Any Stage Two has already tortured, maimed and killed innocents. So don’t hesitate to hit them with everything you’ve got.’

‘There are fifty of us, so we are splitting into five groups of ten. The captains of each group will be Seeker, Italy, Joker, Patronus and myself,’ she proceeded, producing four pieces of parchment from her robes, ‘the sub-team you each have been assigned to is on this list. Once you have made the groups and seen your instructions, burn the parchments,’ she instructed, speaking with authority to the silent crowd. ‘That is all. May Merlin be with all of you,’ she finished.

Turning to where Harry was, she said 'Snorkack, Avenger, Gryffindor, Princess Pingyang, Loony, Eton, Hound, Fiendfyre, Jewel – to me!'

Nine figures approached Owl's silhouette and waited until she lowered the wards. After that, she gestured them to follow her. Pointing one finger at her feet, she cast a spell on them silently and started walking again. Harry understood that she wanted them to cast a non-verbal Silencing Spell on their feet, too, so he obliged her.

The rest of the teams were still close, but each was heading in a different direction. It looked as if Owl's plan consisted of surrounding the camp and then attacking the Death Eaters with everything they had.

As they came closer to the borders of the forest, they all started hearing human voices, Death Eater voices. Owl raised her hand, motioning them to stop. She then gestured them to crouch down to hide behind the bush in front of them. Crowded behind the bush though it was, at least they were safe enough and had a good deal of sight.

Two hundred feet away from their hiding place, Harry could see what appeared to be a Muggle camp. Several white tents were arranged in neat lines, with torches on the ground lit to illuminate the way around them. Further away from the tents, Harry thought he could see what looked like a huge stadium, probably used for battle training. What piqued Harry's curiosity was not the Muggle-ness of the camp, but a single tent. That particular tent seemed to be in the middle of the camp, flanked by numerous others. Unlike the others, this tent was not white, but some other colour. Night had already fallen, so Harry was not sure which colour it was. Perhaps black? In any case, Harry thought that one important Death Eater must be residing in that tent.

Harry was not the only one to notice, he felt the rest of his team tense when they all saw it. Owl caught their attention and lifted three fingers into the air, he face all over with worry. Harry had absolutely

no idea what that was about, but it seemed to be bad news for them.

Owl drew out her wand and Disillusioned herself, signalling the rest of them to do the same and to follow her. Forming a line, Harry behind Owl, they approached the camp as silently as they could. Fortunately, it seemed that the Death Eaters were all in their tents, so they wouldn't spot their shadowy silhouettes moving.

The closer they got to the camp, the better he could see how it was. Harry nearly snorted at just how Muggle it looked. He drew his sight to the special tent and from that distance, he could see that it was pitch black and bigger than the rest of them. Who that tent belonged to, Harry didn't know. He wasn't sure if he wanted to know.

Harry heard a rustle and crouched to the ground, pulling Owl down with him. The rest of the team seemed to notice their move, and laid on their bellies on the grass.

It had been a wise move, because three figures emerged from the black tent a second later. They were far enough away that he couldn't see their faces perfectly, but it was definitely one man and two women. The man was tall and lean, wearing a dark grey robe, with nearly albino-white hair. He seemed quite young, even though he had a hideous fresh-looking wound that started above his eyebrow and went down across his cheek, jaws and neck to disappear under his robes, leaving his eye intact. It was very bloody and intimidating. He stood there with his arms crossed, a wand in his hand.

The figure next to him was that of a woman. She was tall and elegant, wearing long black robes, and had black locks that shone with the torches' fire surrounding her face. Harry gasped - Bellatrix was there. But something was amiss; she looked way too young. The change in Bellatrix was amazing, Harry couldn't grasp how different she looked in this place, where she had never been disfigured by spending many years in a stint in Azkaban. It was almost uncanny: she should

be around fifty and yet looked like twenty-something. In any case, Harry surprised himself by thinking that Bellatrix was stunning. Shaking those disturbing thoughts, Harry moved to watch the last figure.

The third woman was petite and draped in a dark red robe. He couldn't see her face because she had a hood over her head. She was slim and small, but she stood there with a staggering air of confidence. Harry would bet that this woman was a very high-ranking Death Eater.

Forgetting all about the team, Harry's true Gryffindorly nature kicked in, he started crawling closer to the three Death Eaters. Fortunately or unfortunately, he didn't get very far, as he heard a scuttle behind him and then someone grabbed his ankle forcefully. Damn.

Straining his ears, Harry tried to eavesdrop on their conversation. Sadly, he could only hear bits and pieces.

'Obviously worried... can't explain... keeps dreaming about his death... Hades says they were safe... Don't know what it means...' he heard the small woman say. He knew that voice, but it was so cold he couldn't place it.

'... Renegades behind it... Trick... He's immortal... traitor... poison... don't understand,' the man muttered between his teeth. Again, Harry knew that voice; but where from, he didn't know.

'KILL THEM ALL NASTY ICKLE BABIES!' Bellatrix roared, true to her usual crazy self.

'Shut up, you idiot!' The woman ordered, placing the tip of her wand

on Bellatrix neck making Harry open his eyes wide in shock. Nobody could ever do that to the fearsome Death Eater Lady, nobody. Only one could do that without being placed under the Cruciatus Curse until their brains resembled scrambled eggs, and that was Lord Voldemort himself. But it was obvious that this woman wasn't Voldemort – the different dimensions couldn't have changed that much, could they? So that could only mean -

Harry cursed silently. That woman was one of the Unnameables.

It could only be Artemis or Aphrodite, but which of them was her? He had been told that Aphrodite was an incredibly beautiful woman, more so than Bellatrix, but her hood was up, so she couldn't see her face. Artemis was Voldemort's heiress, but the woman over there looked just so small he couldn't imagine her being the legendary Artemis. Then again, smiling despite himself, as George Weasley once said "size is no guarantee of power... Look at Ginny. You've never been on the receiving end of one of her Bat-Bogey Hexes, have you?"

Harry shook his head, concentrating back on the conversation ahead. The woman had taken her wand off Bellatrix's neck, but she was holding it up in a very menacing way.

‘... Orders have been sent... do as you were told... set up as we speak... man in place...’

‘... Trustworthy... means necessary... morons... fifteen Killing Curses... Wormtail...’

Harry's ears perked up. Wormtail? Did she say Wormtail?

‘...Returning... dead...positions... Father... stick to the plan,’ the

woman finished, turning her back on the other two without looking back and disappeared with a soft 'pop' into the night.

The man shook his head lightly. '... cool down... know how it is...erratic... Mudbloods... must go...' Harry couldn't quite catch the last words he said before Disapparating, but he did see that they left Bellatrix very worried. Good, though Harry. Anything that made Bellatrix unhappy was good news.

Bellatrix pulled her hood up and turned around to enter her pitch-black tent. Then Harry realised something and nearly laughed out loud. He had figured all out, and was surprised by how obvious it was.

The Unnameables wore different colours, just like students from different Houses at Hogwarts did. The rest of the Death Eaters, Harry supposed, wore simple black, but the Unnameables didn't. He didn't know why Voldemort would want them dressing in different colours, but then again he couldn't fathom the Dark Lord's mind sometimes, no matter how many times he had been wandering in his thoughts.

The man was an Unnameable and so were the other two women. Since there were three male Unnameables, he couldn't know which one he was. The woman in dark red robes, the one who had talked most of the time and threatened Bellatrix; that woman had been Artemis.

Harry nearly slapped himself. But of course! She had said "Father"! She must've been talking about her adopted father – Voldemort!

His thoughts turned to Bellatrix: she was the Unnameable Number Three; Bellatrix was Aphrodite. It all fit, Bellatrix's colour was black because she was a bloody Black! When Owl had lifted three fingers into the air before, that was because she recognised that black belonged to the Unnameable Number Three.

But before he could think any further, Owl grabbed him by the neck and whispered threateningly into his ear 'if you ever do that again, I'll kill you myself.' Harry gulped.

She pulled him up to his feet, and after making sure that the team was complete – by means unknown to Harry, since they were all still Disillusioned – she grabbed his hand and crept forward towards the camp.

Suddenly, she urged him to stop. He couldn't see a thing, but he could sense that she was moving her wand, presumably to check for any further wards. Harry doubted there were, the Fidelius was supposed to be impenetrable, so the Death Eaters would feel very safe and in no need of extra wards. That reminded him he'd have to ask Owl how she had managed to break the Fidelius. Well, he'd ask her when he was positive she wouldn't kill him on sight.

Feeling a tug on his sleeve, he realised that Owl wanted to tell the group something.

'All set. We are attacking them in ten,' she whispered. 'Thanks to the idiot next to me who could've jeopardised the entire mission,' she growled, 'we gathered that the Unnameable Number Three is here, and it's Bellatrix. Positive,' she continued, ignoring the small gasps. 'The plan is for each of you to raid each tent save for Bellatrix's, maintaining your Disillusionment Charms. Place a Silencing Charm on each tent before you raid it, so that the screams won't be heard,' she explained, her voice not giving away any feeling. 'When the battle is out, bring down the Charm, or else we won't recognise each other. Kill as many as you can, using whatever means you deem necessary. Put a small "X" on each tent after you have disposed of all the Death Eaters inside. Do not – under any circumstance – attempt to break into Bellatrix's tent. We will all need to work together if we want to bring her down. Understood?'

Silence followed that question, which seemed to be what Owl was looking for. He felt her next to him rummaging in her robes. Shortly afterwards, he heard her speak in an undertone, 'Seeker, our team is in position. You know the drill. Wait for our signal to attack. It will start raining in six minutes sharp.'

What a bizarre message, Harry thought. And how was she communicating with Seeker, the leader of another sub-team? He didn't have enough time to ponder about that question because Owl pulled him forward. Rather forcefully, if he might add.

They crept towards the camp slowly. As they shortened the distance between themselves and the camp, Harry started getting anxious. In another world, Harry would have stormed in with his Gryffindor bravado; the only thought in his mind would be to keep the ones he cared about safe. Now, it was very different. Gone were his reckless tendencies. And Harry knew the reason why: this wasn't to defend – this was murder.

The camp was practically silent. The only small sounds that he could hear came from inside the nearest tents. Owl tugged at his sleeve once again, and Harry took it as a sign that each team member had to separate and start killing Stage Two Death Eaters off. Gulping, he turned to his left and, careful not to knock over one of the torches, he slid very silently into the nearest tent.

The last time he had been in a magical tent had been at the Quidditch World Cup, where he had stayed with all of the Weasley boys. But where he had stayed that time and the tent he was in now were very different situations. At the Quidditch World Cup, he had been amazed that a house could fit in it; but this one was very small, almost Muggle, even.

Three Death Eaters were sleeping soundly on the ground inside, with thick blankets draped over them. What surprised him was that one of them had left a candle lit next to him. Furrowing his brows, Harry

approached the sleeping figure and gasped.

The boy could be no older than twelve. The boy must've let the candle because he was probably scared. Harry then realised that he was the most ill-disposed man for the job. How on earth was he supposed to murder a preteen in cold blood? He shook his head – he just couldn't do it. He hoped that Owl would understand, but something in the back of his head told him that she wouldn't care about the boy's age, she would just care about him being a Death Eater and about Harry not killing him.

It dawned on him that there was a real difference between practising with dummies and the real thing. He smiled slightly at that; perhaps he wasn't so lost after all. He refused to do it, full stop. Swishing his hand, he cast a slightly overcharged Stunner at each figure. Powerful enough that a simple Ennervate wouldn't do, but not strong enough to stop their hearts. He then bound them and retrieved their wands, pocketing them inside his robe. Time to go out.

As soon as he stepped out, it started raining. Small drops at first that soon turned into a downpour. Harry wondered if that was the signal for Seeker's team to start the attacks. But how could Owl control the weather? She wasn't that powerful.

Harry shook his head, no wasn't the time for thoughts. Swishing his wand, he whispered 'Flagrate' and drew a small "X". With his free hand, he pushed the letter until it scorched the cloth from the tent. He sighed. His work there was done.

'BLOODY BRITAIN WITH ITS BLOODY RAIN!'

Harry's heart skipped a beat. Bellatrix had gone out from her tent. Damnit, that could go very wrong. Harry watched her, paralysed in fear as she fumbled with her wand, muttering and cackling insanely all the time. He prayed that she wouldn't notice anything.

‘KERRIC! KERRIC!’ she yelled, moving past her tent and straight into the one next to hers. Harry opened his eyes widely when he saw that the tent was marked with an “X”. That meant that whoever was inside – Kerric – was dead. Harry shut his eyes tightly and waited. The seconds seemed to creep by, and for the longest of times he could only hear the nervous beating of his heart, quickly pumping blood through his body.

‘EVERYONE UP!’ Bellatrix roared, rushing out of the tent. ‘WE ARE UNDER ATTACK!’

And so it began. Holding his wand tight in his hand, Harry gave himself one millisecond to breathe deeply, allowing himself to accept that his hands were about to get stained with blood.

As the first Death Eaters started running out of their tents, bedraggled and with their nightclothes on but ready to battle, Harry decided to go against Owl’s order and kept the Disillusionment Charm on. Wand arm and left arm in opposite directions, he started shooting overcharged Stunners around, bringing Death Eaters down at once.

Harry moved, and suddenly he was in the middle of an aisle. Even though he wasn’t visible, his Stunners were. As if on cue, no less than ten Killing Curses hit the place where he had been barely a second before. He pressed himself against a tent, trying to breathe evenly so that nothing could give him away.

Tiptoeing, he skirted around the tent and fired a couple of Stunners at the Death Eaters in front of him, grinning when he saw them fall. On to the next ones.

The battle was getting bloody. All of the Renegades had taken down

the Disillusionment Charms and were fighting with their deadliest arsenal. From the corner of his eye he could see Owl duelling with Bellatrix, and to say that it was impressive would be the understatement of the century.

Harry crouched again, careful not to bump against someone lest he was discovered. He saw another three Death Eaters flinging curses against one of the Renegades. Using three of his fingers, he shot at them another three supercharged Stunners. He was pleased to see them fall to the ground, and even more pleased when he realised that Neville had been the one in need of help, and that he was perfectly all right.

Harry ran to him and whispered, 'Neville, it's Harry. I'm right behind you.'

Neville did a small jump but other than that pretended he hadn't heard him and continued firing curses at Death Eaters. 'What are you doing? Owl said -'

'I know, but I figured it'd be best if I stayed under the charm for extra back-up,' he muttered under his breath, dodging yet another Killing Curse from an approaching Death Eater, one who soon fell to his Stunner.

'What hexes are you using?' Neville asked, turning to face another enemy.

'Overcharged Stunners. I just can't,' Harry said in a small voice, half-ashamed, half-relieved that he couldn't go through it.

Neville nodded as he ducked a curse that looked very much like a Cruciatus. 'Neither could I,' he admitted, sending a Befuddlement

Hex at another enemy.

Harry smiled briefly. 'I'm off to help Owl with Bellatrix, want to come?'

He could practically see the evil grin under Neville's hood. At Harry's request, he went back under the Disillusionment Charm. Swiftly, they moved towards the source of insane cackling, knowing that was Bellatrix. Who else would sound that mental?

Trying to avoid the centre of the aisles, they pressed their bodies against the rows of tents and moved as silently as they could, firing hexes and Stunners at each Death Eater they saw, trying not to distract themselves when they recognised one of their own down.

He saw Owl coming. Her hood was down and her hair was in complete disarray, bushier and wilder than he had ever seen it before, with matted blood in it. Tears were running down her face and washing the wounds on it. She was running and limping and firing Killing Curses at each Death Eater she saw, narrowly avoiding several curses herself. He could see that she was seriously distressed and that she was muttering something that made her even more distraught, but he didn't know exactly what until she came a bit closer.

'Where is he? Please don't – Avada Kedavra! – let him be dead...

Please don't – Lacerus!' she cried, tears and blood running down her cheeks, clutching one of her sides with all of her strength.

Harry realised that she was wounded, so he and Neville started running towards her to help her. His feet couldn't move fast enough and he hoped that her wound wasn't too serious.

Something lurked in the shadows, ready to pounce. Harry, his reason frozen in the fear that he may lose Owl, didn't think about the repercussions and fired the first spell that came to his mind, the

same spell he had seen Owl use on a dummy while they practised.

‘Incendia Vesica!’ he roared with all of his might, his eyes only long enough on his spell to notice a massive purple beam that went straight to the waiting Death Eater. His focus then got back on Owl. He didn’t notice the Death Eater scream in excruciating agony, nor did he notice when the sharp steel tore the body into pieces. It wouldn’t be until much later that he’d realise he had killed a man without a second thought.

They finally reached Owl and Harry pulled her into his arms as soon as she was an arm away. He gasped when her body hit his and he felt blood oozing freely from her stomach onto his robes.

‘Owl, it’s me. It’s Harry,’ he whispered soothingly, ‘I’m here, you are safe,’ he said, casting a Disillusionment Charm on her while lifting her up in his arms. Whistling softly at Neville, they both moved away from where the battle was taking place and hid behind a tent. When Harry felt they were safe enough, he lowered her gently to the ground and turned to immediately erect some basic wards, including an invisibility one.

‘Harry,’ she panted, her eyes firmly shut when Harry returned them all to visibility. ‘Why – haven’t you – done,’ she coughed, splattering blood everywhere, ‘as I said?’ she asked, while Harry applied pressure to the wound in her stomach, barely listening to her. ‘Always follow – your captain’s orders,’ she said with visible effort, ‘always, Harry,’ she finished with a small smile.

Both he and Neville started working on her frantically. To his surprise, Neville pulled out a box from his robes and opened it, hastily taking out two vials of potion, one green and one red. ‘I always carry this with me,’ Neville answered to his unasked question. ‘Just in case.’

Harry nodded, immensely grateful at Neville's good thinking, while he continued to apply pressure on the wound. His friend seemed to know what he was doing, so he focused on not letting any more blood run out of her body.

'She will not die,' Neville stated with a determined expression on his face. 'Continue applying pressure, I'll monitor her heartbeat.'

Owl started breathing erratically and coughing up more and more blood. Harry was so gripped with fear for her, he didn't know what to do. The battle before him seemed to be in the past, only an annoying buzz. The only thing that mattered to him was his friend lying down there, in a puddle of her own blood.

Harry concentrated on the wound beneath his hands. Focusing like he had never done before, Harry willed his magic to heal the wound, he forced his magic to shape itself in a way that would repair the damage done to her internal organs. He had never done that before, but he was exhilarated when he noticed a silver glow under his hands and what seemed to be a steadily closing hole.

Neville smiled at him and continued forcing potions down her throat, lifting her head so that she could swallow them better. But Owl had lost too much blood.

Her eyes started fluttering madly and she muttered something that sounded like 'I'm tired.' Harry yelled at her to stay awake, anguish leaking from his voice, his chest constricted. But Owl's eyes rolled to the back of her skull.

'NO!' he screamed.

'HARRY! CPR RIGHT NOW! You do the breathing, I'll take care of

her heart' Neville ordered, while tearing open her shirt. Harry nodded, scooting his body closer to Owl's head and tilted her head backwards, closing her nostrils with his fingers.

Neville, one hand compressing rhythmically her stomach and the other one with his wand pointed at her chest and yelled 'claustrum!' a beam of red light hit her, making her back arch.

Harry lowered his mouth to hers and exhaled.

'Claustrum!'

Tears leaking from his eyes, Harry pushed air into his friend's body.

'Claustrum!'

Owl opened her eyes, hyperventilating and coughing up blood.

Neville nodded at him while he fed her more potions. Harry in turn smiled feebly at him. They kept working on her frantically until Neville stated that she was very weak, but out of danger.

Harry sighed in relief, bloody thankful that Neville was there with him. If he hadn't been... if it just had been Harry all by himself – what would have happened... Harry would never have forgiven himself. Shaking off those dark thoughts, he decided to stop thinking about the "what if's" and concentrated on his friend lying there.

'You know,' he whispered, 'if Ron had watched this, he'd be after my blood, thinking that I was stealing you away from him,' he finished, smiling softly at her.

She tried to laugh but ended up coughing again. 'Silly,' said Owl,

raising one hand at him as if to swat him. 'You and I both know you are Ginny's property,' she whispered, exhausted.

Harry chuckled at that. Truer words had never been said.

'Harry,' said Owl. 'Get back to the battle and kick Bellatrix's arse,' she wheezed. Winking one eye at him, she added, 'that is an order!'

He glanced at Neville who barely nodded at him and added 'she'll be fine; I'll take care of her while you are gone,' he gave him a reassuring smile.

He felt quite uneasy about leaving them here, but he had erected safe wards. 'I'll be back, I promise,' he said and took off running, adrenaline pumping back into his veins. He would do this for Owl, the consequences be damned! He'd deal with the guilt later, but now he needed to vent off his anger, the anger that had been repressed inside of him since he nearly watched his friend die.

He didn't know how long they had been out with Owl. Ten minutes? Half an hour? An hour? He didn't care. The battle was still raging and he had to find Bellatrix.

He shot out like a bat from hell, jumping over the bodies piled on the ground and ducking curses thrown at him, sending back one of his own when he saw a clear target, his intention to maim but not to kill. He moved at an inhuman speed, looking out for Bellatrix; nothing else mattered. It had most likely been her who had rendered Owl in such a state, and the memory of her heart stopping infused enough anger in him to give him another boost of energy.

He found Cho Chang. She had her hood down and was wrestling a Death Eater.

'Where have you been?' she shouted at him, punching a Death

Eater on the nose at the same time. 'Owl was dead worried about you!'

Harry shot a Severing Curse at the Death Eater's arm and he crumbled to the ground on pain. Turning to Cho he gritted between his teeth, 'Saving her life along with Avenger. Had to CPR her,' he explained while kicking another minion on the knee brutally enough to break it.

Cho took out one of the metallic chopsticks in her bun and threw it at yet another Death Eater, landing with a deadly accuracy on the throat. Ignoring the gurgling, she said 'Well, that one won't wake up. I infused it with Acromantula venom.'

Harry smiled briefly. Guess that complicated hair-do was more than just stylish. Wand at the ready, they both walked silently, looking out for possible threats.

'There were more than eighty-nine Death Eaters,' she explained out of breath, 'plus, there was also Aphrodite and Rabastan Lestrage. The bastard is down, but the bitch isn't. She howled in grief when we took down her brother-in-law,' she added, smirking nastily.

'But we have had many losses,' said Cho, sobering up immediately. 'We've lost Loony and Hound in our team, and we have been the luckiest.' She threw another chopstick at another guy, stabbing him right through the heart, 'I lost my wand and was nearly killed, but Snorkack arrived just in time.'

'Here, wait,' Harry said, pulling out the wand he had stolen from the Death Eaters he had put to sleep. 'Pick whichever.'

Cho smiled at him in gratitude.

BOOM!

Cho wasn't by his side anymore but thrown twenty feet across.

'NO!' he started running, but someone blocked him.

Bellatrix.

'Awww, does the itty bitty Renegade care for his kung-fu girlie?' she mocked him, twirling her wand between her fingers, smiling maniacally at him. 'Too late for her, darling, too late,' she singsonged at him, the unhinged smile unwavering.

Harry took a deep breath. Don't rise to the bait, she wants to provoke you so that you'll be clumsy enough to give away information, he thought. He calmed himself down and tuned Bellatrix out. He focused on his surroundings: they were near the border of the camp, barely ten feet away from where they had entered the camp. Bodies lay sprawled over the ground, covering most of it. Many torches had been knocked over and from the whiff of burning flesh he caught, it hadn't been a pretty sight. It was still raining, which was a relative advantage for him. Bellatrix seemed to despise the rain, which was to his advantage; but it was also a drawback because the ground would eventually turn muddy.

While Bellatrix cackled insanely, Harry observed her. She had a cut on her cheek and limped a bit, but it was barely noticeable. Harry frowned; there was something in the way she moved that didn't make sense. Her body language told him that she was tired and not as coordinated as she had been before fighting, but Bellatrix hadn't stopped laughing and twirling madly, which didn't make any sense. Well, then again, who was he to fathom the ways a deranged mind

work?

Suddenly, she fired a Cruciatus-looking curse at him and Harry snapped out of his thoughts to dodge it. Panting slightly, he cast an Expelliarmus at her.

She laughed merrily. 'Come on, ickle Renegade, you can do better than that,' she taunted him, sending another two Cruciatus at him.

Harry rolled over to avoid the vivid-red curses and shot a Blinding Hex at her, which she dodged easily. He was testing her and she was testing him, and they both knew it. Harry narrowed his eyes; she was hiding her exhaustion very well. While duelling, she seemed as graceful as a cat, but Harry knew she was knackered. Good, because he wasn't tired at all.

Bellatrix had stopped her jaunts and started attacking in earnest. Testing time was over, or so it seemed. Harry ducked, rolled twisted and turned to avoid the stream of colourful curses thrown his way; some he recognised, some he didn't. No doubt they were all extremely nasty.

Bellatrix was fuming when she was done with her barrage of curses, most likely because none had hit her target and that was something she was not accustomed to. But Harry wouldn't allow her to continue attacking him without sending some of his own at her.

Making the decision of "act now, regret later" he flung hexes at her at random, some Light and some very Dark. 'Lacerus! Caecus!' He rolled over as she fired a Killing Curse at him, barely avoiding the rush of death that accompanied it. 'Incendia Vesica! Cordis Arrestum!' he yelled, taking Bellatrix by surprise as she threw herself to the ground, nearly getting hit by the last curse.

She lifted her head and Harry could see the anger swirling in her

eyes. 'You dare -'

Harry dignified that with another volley of deadly hexes. He was itching to show her some of his wandless abilities, but since the duel seemed fairly matched while using his wand, he decided against it so he could surprise Voldemort when they met again.

While they both sparred, Harry began to employ the technique he had used on Cho: get steadily closer to her with every hex thrown and assault her physically. Considering her background, Bellatrix's hatred of everything that was Muggle would make her an easy prey to a physical attack, because it would be the last thing she would expect from another wizard.

'So tell me – Ardesco! – why is your robe different from the rest of your merry band of Mudbloods?'

Harry knew better than to pay any attention to what her mouth said if it wasn't a curse. He remained silent, firing a couple of Purple Rain Curses mingled with two overcharged Stunners and a Disarming Spell. Old habits die hard. He was pleased to notice that he was gaining ground and that she was very slowly moving backwards. Right then, Harry had the upper-hand of the duel.

'Mudblood! Answer to me when I'm talking to you! Anima exuro!' she yelled at him, enraged.

Harry opened his eyes and dodged the curse as effectively as he could. Bellatrix was getting very mad, only that could've prompted her to fling the Soul Incinerating Curse at him; one very difficult to perform that usually tended to backfire upon the caster.

He was so close to her then he would only need a couple more of minutes to reach her. He noticed dully that they had gone off the

camp limits and were very slowly heading towards the forest. He was positive Bellatrix wouldn't anticipate a physical attack, but she had been more perceptive than Cho and moved backwards the minute she saw him move towards her.

'Lacerus! Lacerus!' he shot two curses at once, one pointing at her mid-section and the other at her heart. She dodged to her right and forward, placing herself right in front of Harry's arm range.

He didn't hesitate, with all the strength he could muster, he crashed his elbow on her face and kicked her abdomen as fast as he could. He had been right, she hadn't expected it. Quickly, he took the chance and plucked her wand from her hand, grabbing her arm and twisting it behind her back tightly to immobilise her.

Now that the fight between them had ended and that his mind was not one hundred percent concentrated on surviving, that close up he noticed that Bellatrix, looking far younger than she was supposed to, was indeed very beautiful. Perhaps not as much so as to say that his eyes were hurting, but enough to recognise that with one simple gesture, she could have tides of men at her feet.

But more than that, Harry took pleasure in the fact that he had faced Bellatrix and not only lived to tell the tale, but defeated her soundly. Two wands pressed on her carotid artery, he smirked at her and whispered, 'It seems that Voldemort's Elite has been bested by common, unworthy and vulgar Muggle fighting. How does that feel?' he taunted her, enjoying immensely not being on the receiving end of the jaunts.

He had expected her to start ranting about his having called her Master by his chosen name, besmirching his noble title with his unworthy Mudblood lips. However, she surprised him when she looked at him, square in the eyes.

‘I’ll be ready the next time I meet a brawling boy such as yourself,’ she promised him, not a hint of madness in her midnight blue eyes. She turned her face and sneered at him. ‘You won this round, you won’t be so lucky next time,’ she threatened, and with a ‘pop’ she Disapparated.

Harry cursed. They had gone off the limits of Owl’s wards so she was able to escape. Swearing under his breath, he went back to the camp, ready to be severely told off by Owl. It had been stupid of him to push her to a place where she could’ve escaped, and Harry berated himself all the way to the camp.

The battle was now over, the few surviving Death Eaters were being either executed or bound and gagged by those who had more mercy. Corpses lay at his feet, and he tried very hard not to look at them as he passed through the aisles. He was looking for Neville and Owl, praying that both of them were alright, safe and sound behind the wards he had placed.

He was overjoyed to see them both alive and well where he had placed them. Owl was still looking very pale, but the ghostly expression had left her face to Harry’s relief. She was slowly recovering thanks to Neville’s impeccable timing and skills, and wasn’t surprised when Neville picked her into his arms and started walking to the borders of the forest where he would be able to Disapparate with Owl and take her home to be properly inspected by one of their Healers.

Harry, exhaustion pumping through his body, went to the rest of the Renegades and helped them with the corpses. It was a very scarring experience for Harry, piling up Death Eater bodies to incinerate them later, while carefully aligning those cadavers that belonged to the Renegades. Harry nearly choked when he realised that his former Astronomy teacher, Professor Sinistra, was now laying cold in his

arms, her eyes dull and glassy and an expression of utter terror marked on her face.

‘Yes, that was Loony, she was in our team,’ said Snorkack, appearing out of thin air. He glanced at her, and he could see the coiling pain that danced in her eyes. ‘She was always very kind to me and listened to me when I felt down,’ she added, placing her hand on her cheek, not minding the caked blood beneath her hands. ‘Don’t close her eyes, Harry. Let her watch the stars she loved,’ she whispered, tears rolling freely down her cheeks.

Harry nodded and laid Professor Sinistra on the ground with the other fallen Renegades.

He kept working diligently all throughout the night, focusing on his fight with Bellatrix more than on what he was doing. All the death and gore around him was getting to him, so he needed to shift his thoughts to something less traumatising.

Sighing, he supposed that Bellatrix was now getting severely reprimanded by Voldemort. He didn’t know how Riddle treated his five Unmentionables, but he doubted he’d go easy on them, especially after such a failure on their part: Bellatrix had been the only one able to escape out of more than one hundred Death Eaters.

So there he stayed, incinerating and moving corpses, but his mind was on Bellatrix, gathering all the information he had pulled from his duel against her. She was as swift and deadly as ever, perhaps she was even faster than in his own world. She was as crazy and taunting as ever, save for that one time when she had looked at him square in the eye and Harry saw no hint of madness in her. All in all, Bellatrix was a nasty piece of work.

It wasn’t until much later, already in his bed, that a staggering realisation hit Harry making him choke: Bellatrix didn’t have midnight

blue eyes – her eyes were black!

His heart missing a beat and feeling a pit of dread in the bottom of his stomach, it dawned on him that the woman he had fought against wasn't Bellatrix, but someone else pretending to be her! It hadn't been the fearsome Unmentionable Number Three, but a replacement!

Harry swore so loudly the students in Hogwarts woke up with a start.

-oOoOoOoOo-

DISCLAIMER: Itsy-bitsy Harry screwed it up big-time. Down came Voldy and cursed Harry out. Out came Dumbles and kicked Voldy's arse and itsy-bitsy Harry screwed it up again. Er, no I don't own Harry Potter or "Itsy-bitsy Spider".

-oOoOoOoOo-

A/N: well, another chapter is done. I can't believe how much I enjoyed writing it, heh heh. Oh, by the way, she that green button below? It's for reviewing, and it's free of charge, so why don't you leave a review, pretty please? Oh, by the way, I modified a scene in chapter ten, To sum it up, Michael didn't retrieve the Horcrux, he only helped devising the plan to do so.

Yes, I have changed the name of the Unmentionables; they are the "Unnameables" now. When a couple of readers said that it reminded them of underwear, I decided to change it. Because underwear isn't that intimidating, is it? Hehe. **Groan** Now I have to go back to previous chapter and change it. Evil world =)

I hope you all enjoyed it. If you want to, there is a link on my profile to join my Yahoo! Group.

Until next time,

Vermouth

Member of the Siriusan order.

(REVISED by my incredibly talented beta-reader Hasufel:
26/05/2009)

Chapter Twelve

Know Thy Self

Friday, 25th of December 1998

TERRORIST ATTACK ON INCHMURRIN!

By Rigoberta Nott

Yesterday night it was reported that an atrocious attack took place on the quiet island of Inchmurrin, in Loch Lomond. The island served as a settlement for the brave souls who would one day take their place to defend our glorious and noble nation. But their lives were cruelly cut short by the terrorist group “The Renegades”.

The training camp was composed of a total of one hundred and fifty-two recruits, Rabastan Lestrangle of the Inner Circle, and Aphrodite, the accomplished Unnameable Number Three. The Renegades attacked them very late in the night, somehow foiling the Fidelius Charm that protected the camp. Like the true blood-thirsty animals they are, they erected wards so that nobody could escape and then proceeded to attack with no mercy. Revelling in the massacre and gore, they left no man or woman standing, save for the courageous Aphrodite. In an exclusive interview, she confessed that she barely escaped alive; she had been defending her lair like a proud mother, but the Renegades outnumbered them severely and, one by one, she saw each of her students fall. Cornered by no less than twenty Renegades, she managed to pull a clever trick on them and reached the borders of the wards. From there she Disapparated to bring the message of the terrible tragedy to our esteemed Lord Britain.

The news of the loss of those brave patriots that gave their lives to defend our country weighed severely upon Lord Britain’s shoulders. The loss of a close friend, Rabastan of the Most Ancient and Wise

House of Lestrangle, is a wound carved deep into Lord Britain's heart. The brother of the deceased, Heir to the Lestrangle Legacy Rodolphus and his wife, Madam Bellatrix Lestrangle, have been excused by Lord Britain so they could mourn Rabastan in peace.

The Renegades not only murdered the recruits in cold blood, but also mutilated their bodies like the Mudblood abominations they are. Soldiers were sent to the settlement later to retrieve the bodies, but there were only piles of cremated corpses and blood staining the ground. Sick at the bloody sight, they returned home, the cruel images of what had been done to their compatriots etched in their minds.

Although ridiculously deficient in numbers, the Renegades most certainly make up for it in cruelty. They thrive on murder, slaughter, gore and terror. They seek to overturn our government by force and reinstate the mayhem that ruled over our country before Lord Britain ascended. Their foul blood shows that they are nothing more than rabid mongrels: uncivilised, uncultured and filthy half-breeds. However, we profess caution to all of our readers: inferior semi-human beings as they may be, they live to cause pain.

Lord Britain has taken the news of this attack very seriously. He admits that he was initially baffled at how they thwarted the Fidelius Charm. Explanations such as having a double-crosser in our midst are absurd, for he confessed that he had been the Secret Keeper. However, his brilliant mind already has several theories and they are following all leads.

Our graceful Lord is devising new ways and wards to protect the soldiers of Britain so that this abomination will never happen again. Apart from that, Lord Britain has classified the elimination of the Renegades as the number one priority, announcing that his most trusted woman will lead Britain against the terrorists: his own Heiress, Artemis.

Great Britain will triumph!

-oOoOoOoOo-

The echo of thunder rumbled over the horizon; morning greeted Harry with a downpour. Heavy, dark clouds covered the skies like a cold, dark mattress, with none of the warmth it should have. Drops of rain tickled Harry's face. He closed his eyes and enjoyed the wetness on his skin, the simple contact making him feel cleansed and somehow pure and whole again. He could feel the knot in his chest starting to loosen for the first time since the attack.

Harry had killed a man in battle. He may have even killed more than one with one of his spells, but his first death was confirmed. He had only left blood-soaked pieces of the Death Eater on the ground. He hadn't even remembered about it until that morning. He didn't feel guilty about terminating that man's life – and that was what worried him.

Harry knew he should feel guilty, he should feel the excruciatingly painful consequences of taking a life, that soul-wrenching remorse. But he didn't, he felt oddly calm about it. His mind screamed at him, telling him a different opinion; but deep down, Harry knew it was not a wound on his heart, he knew he had done the only thing he could have done. It had saved Owl's life, so it had been worth it.

It seemed that what he feared had already come to pass: he had taken a life and felt no remorse for it – and that's what was eating him. He stayed out in the rain, letting the raindrops wash off the invisible grime he felt on his body.

At first, he hadn't understood himself. He had been so adverse to killing he had put himself and others in danger. He had refused to do it. Looking back, he realised that no matter how strong his Stunners were, there was still the chance that they could have woken up and taken lives of Renegades. So he might as well have killed some of

his own. Harry had thought he could never take a life; while in battle his own conscience and fear kept him from taking another person down. It was as if there was an impenetrable wall between the two choices. It was a melody, a feeling that crescendoed, but at the climax - the near death of a good friend - the tempo fell into wildness and rage, until it culminated in something he thought he could never do: destroying a life.

Wars were a terrible thing. They could tear a man's life and sanity, ravage and destroy families, and annihilate entire generations. Wars were terrible because you left not only those you loved behind, but also yourself; and Harry was just realising this.

‘Harry,’ a voice whispered softly behind him. ‘I’m sorry.’

He turned around to see Owl. She gasped at the sight of him. Harry reckoned that he might just not be looking his best at the moment. He shrugged it off and welcomed her to sit on his bed. She obliged, and approached it gingerly, her face never leaving his, a gentle and apprehensive expression on it. Harry recognised it very well. It was the same expression Hermione had worn after Sirius had fallen through the Veil: fierce yet cautious, worried yet respectful and with a tinge of deep care.

Harry sighed; Hermione would always be Hermione, no matter if she was now something akin to a terror warrior character modelled by some really disturbed mind. She'd always be brilliant and a good friend, but somewhat over-bearing and with the dubious gift of really bad timing.

‘I -’ she said hesitantly, ‘I wanted to apologise, Harry.’ He stared at her, neither interrupting her nor encouraging her to continue. ‘I

should have never put you in this position.'

Harry shook his head lightly. 'It's a war and I have much to learn.'

Owl nodded. 'Yes; but be that as it may, the truth is that you were not prepared for it.' A quick flash of panic crossed her eyes and she added hastily, 'That is not to say that you aren't physically and magically prepared – but you weren't mentally prepared for it.'

Harry furrowed his eyebrows. He honestly didn't know what to say. 'Perhaps I wasn't,' he replied noncommittally.

'No, you weren't, and I should never have put you in that place. I guess,' she trailed, a pensive look on her face, 'I guess that I was selfish. I was more focused on the fact that because you are here, our odds have improved dramatically. I didn't even consider for a moment that you were not prepared for this kind of war.'

'No, but I had to change my perceptions of wars in the end, didn't I? At least you could call this on-hands experience.'

Hermione shook her head vigorously. 'It's not that, Harry,' she said softly, a very sad smile on her face. 'This world is messed up. It's so messed up that I can't wrap my mind around it when I start thinking about it,' she continued, rising off the bed and pacing up and down the room. 'Voldemort's side... They fight for power, prestige, recognition – for those things humans have always wanted. To an extent, it's understandable,' she raised a hand to stop Harry from interrupting her. 'It doesn't make it morally correct, but I can understand it.'

'But our side – our side is very lost, Harry,' she whispered, a haunted look on her face. 'Most of the time, we don't know what we

are fighting for anymore, we just keep doing it because it's what we know.'

'What do you mean?' Harry asked wearily.

Owl smiled sadly at him. 'I spent the first eleven years of my life living as a Muggle, and they were as calm as could be. For me, the world revolved around my dentist parents and school,' she explained softly, almost to herself. 'But then – then I received a letter from Hogwarts, I was a witch and I discovered another world – a wonderful world – that had always been open to me.'

She crossed her arms, but instead of looking defensive, she looked nostalgic, as if she were remembering better days long gone. 'I was accepted and soon baffled half of the school with my thirst for knowledge. While I was not popular, I was respected by my peers and probably the professors' star pupil. I had found a place where I belonged.'

Harry could see the pain emanating from her as she told him the story of her life. She looked so lost, so crestfallen, he was at a loss for what to do. Owl was strong, indomitable, brilliant, passionate; but the Owl in front of him was, for want of a better word – human.

'But then Voldemort -' she spat with enough hatred to rival Snape's '- Voldemort came back and I had to flee. I am a Muggleborn, so by his standards I was a filthy creature not worth a thing. I barely escaped the snapping of my wand. So all of a sudden, all of my dreams were turned asunder. I fled the country.'

Harry could understand that. How many times he had been afraid of the same thing? Going back to the Dursleys, to a place where he didn't belong.

‘The war broke out, and its echoes reached the continent. I knew that before long it would go further than the British Isles. I had to do something – I couldn’t just flee again... So I used my thirst for knowledge, my love for learning, for discovering unimaginable things; it morphed into an obsession to survive the war. My thirst for knowledge was twisted into a desire to make the other side quiver in fear and retreat. At thirteen, I had left Hermione behind and become what I’m known as now - Owl,’ she spat, disgust on her face.

‘It didn’t take long for me to join the Renegades. I had seen what an open war was already like, I had seen people murdered and mutilated before my eyes. I accepted it. Blood and suffering came to me as easily as breathing.’

Harry never interrupted her; he thought she needed a friendly ear who would listen, someone who would hear Hermione out, not Owl. He gave off a calm impression, but inside, he was horrified.

‘I have done things that made experienced Death Eaters shudder in fear, Harry,’ she continued, bitterness leaking from her voice. ‘I never regretted it, I felt damn proud about it. I thought I was making a difference, and that when it would all be over, I would be able to live a normal and peaceful life.’ She laughed mirthlessly. ‘How stupid I was. After all the things I have done, I could never live a normal life. I need blood and fear to keep on living.’

She scratched her hand absent-mindedly, her gaze unfocused. ‘I live by the sword, Harry, and I used to feel proud knowing that I’d die by the sword.’

‘What made you change?’ he asked quietly.

Owl gave him the saddest and yet truest of smiles. 'You, Harry. At first, it was the dreams. The Hermione I saw there was so different, so alive. I never thought it was real, I thought it was my subconscious telling me something.

'But then you actually came here. And you are unlike anything else on this wretched bloody world. You love life, and you respect it. You are not broken, you are still whole,' she said, with a tone almost of jealousy, pain and remorse leaking from her voice.

She looked at him, and he could feel her gaze piercing through him, searching for the deepest parts of him. With tears tugging at the corners of her eyes, she whispered, 'In a world without a war, there is no place for someone like me. Don't let this war change you, Harry.'

-oOoOoOoOo-

Saturday, 26th of December 1998

MINISTER MALFOY: A BATTLE AGAINST THE TERRORISTS

By Mildred Yaxley

After the hideous attack on Inchmurrin, the magical population of Britain became very worried, not without a reason. The terrorist group "The Renegades" is out there, and since the slaughter in Inchmurrin, it has become more and more of a real and solid threat. The magical community is on edge: we are half-expecting raids on our homes, we expect to find our houses and families destroyed when we get home. The incessant fear of never knowing when it will be your time has sprouted within the hearts of the magical people in Britain.

Before our Lord sought to remodel our nation, this was a daily occurrence. Dumbledore's Mudbloods and Mudblood-lovers raged

against the people in our country. They raided homes, tortured children and killed without remorse. They gained followers because they threatened entire families, usually killing one member to prove a point. Dark times, they were. It was mayhem: Mudbloods were seen in the government, no doubt placed as spies by Dumbledore, for the revolting blood that flowed through their veins made them like common unintelligent animals, useless for anything.

The children of our world deserve better, and our Lord gave them their wish. But now, the terrorists are back in earnest. Even leaderless, with no Dumbledore to throw the first stone, those half-breeds will do anything to destroy the perfect world our Lord created for us.

However, we are pleased to inform you that our Ministry is not leaving the population aside. Indeed, we are their number one priority, and the words of Minister Malfoy speak for themselves.

‘We are most certainly focusing our efforts on stopping this infamy,’ Minister Lucius said calmly when asked. ‘The people of Britain, the noble and pure witches and wizards of our country, deserve the best, they deserve to prosper and live without fear. I will not let any parent go through the devastation I went through when I lost my only child, Draco’ he added very softly, with a very sad look on his noble features.

We all remember the tragedy of the current Minister losing his only son. Born from the Malfoy and Black lines, Draco left this world very early, in an explosion during a Renegade attack at the start of the war. We asked the Minister if he could give us any information concerning their plans to stop the Renegades, but he only shook his head slightly.

‘Miss Yaxley, we cannot reveal any plans lest they fall into the

enemy's hands – oh yes, I'm sure some of the Renegade Mudbloods are able to read, even if most of them can't. Rest assured, there is no one better to cripple the Renegades than the daughter of our Lord, young Artemis.'

Indeed, truer words have never been said. While Artemis was unavailable for comment, her actions speak for themselves. She is the second most powerful magic-wielder in this nation, only surpassed by her father, our esteemed Lord Britain. She is his right arm, and probably his left arm too. Under a red robe, young Artemis wields her power with grace and efficiency, and if there is one person after our Lord who can solve this problem, it's her.

The storm is coming, and behind Artemis we will live to see the breaking of the dawn, our enemies defeated at our feet.

-oOoOoOoOo-

Afternoon found Neville and Harry in the backyard of the house, along with most of the Renegades of Cherry Lane. They stood there in silence, the thunder rampaging above while rain lashed against their bodies, unyielding, unforgiving. The grey skies brought no light to the sombre mood that reigned among them. They were to bury their fallen comrades, as was tradition to do. They were to say their good-byes to twenty-one people; twenty-one human beings who had given their lives for a cause, twenty-one souls who had believed in something and died for it.

The backyard was big and bare. It held none of the frilly flowers and decorations Aunt Petunia liked to have. It lacked the wildness the Burrow had. It was naked and unwelcoming, fenced by weeping willows, dark and perched, their leaves whispering against the winds. The grass was small and held no weeds, it was a continuum of thousands of little sharp teeth with no tiny flowers in between. But what twisted Harry's stomach were the many decaying tombstones that rested on the ground, imposing yet forgotten. In the middle of the

backyard was a piece of morbid architecture Harry remembered very well: an arch made of black stone with a waving black veil that seemed to mock him, and thousand of whispers echoing from it...

The last time he had seen it had been at the end of his fifth year at Hogwarts, when he went in folly to the Ministry and fell into a trap. The last time he had seen it, his godfather had fallen through it, never to be seen again.

Harry couldn't take his eyes off it, not even when a dozen Renegades appeared, black coffins trailing behind them. He saw the arch, and he saw Sirius falling through it again. He saw his own failures, his naïveté and stupidity. He saw the cost of foolhardy decisions. But above all, looking at the undulating veil, he felt the raging and soul-wrenching pain he had felt two years before.

Owl was standing next to the arch and he could see her mouth moving, but he wasn't listening to her; he stood there transfixed by the swaying veil, remembering the way his godfather's back arched before he fell through it, the way his smile never left his face, the way he raged and rushed to pull him out, the way Remus stopped him and the way his voice broke when he told him that Sirius was gone and wouldn't come back.

Harry was glad he was wearing his Unspeakable robes, for he felt free to squeeze his eyes shut to hold back the tears and push those images out of his mind. He was to pay tribute to the fallen Renegades who had died in battle, not remember old wounds. Sirius was alive in this world, he had a second chance; but now he had to mourn those who had died a couple of days ago. He didn't know them, but he knew it wouldn't be respectful to think about something else when those people had died beside him only two days ago.

He turned his eyes to Hermione. She stood there, tall and sombre. To her right was the Veil of Death; to her left several piles of black coffins. He watched her as she levitated one of the coffins, slowly

and delicately and placed it before the veil. Squinting, Harry could see that at the feet of the coffin, silver words had been carved into the blackened wood.

‘...Eton was a Muggleborn, thrown into this world with a trunk full of hopes and expectations. He was a Hufflepuff, loyal and hard-working,’ Owl recited calmly, although years of knowing Hermione made Harry realise there was a strain in her voice.

‘Eton didn’t like to be the centre of attention, he enjoyed a quiet and calm life. He liked Herbology and Astronomy and spent many hours in the library studying. Eton went to Hogwarts with me. He was easily scared and startled, but when the war broke out he shed his fears and became the tough warrior we knew. He used to joke about how he should have stayed in the Muggle world and gone to the school his parents had picked out for him, instead of landing in this unholy world. But he never meant it, he was proud of being a wizard.’

Harry’s heart skipped a beat. He was at the funeral of one of his old classmates. Focused on his problems and the scarce people around him, he had never tried to befriend or even get to know the other Renegades. He knew most of them by their codenames, but he never bothered to talk to them. And now one of his old classmates was dead, and he would never have a chance to know what it had been like for him.

‘Most of us have forgotten what it was like to be able to live in a world without a war; but he never did, he never gave away that part of him that made him so special, he never forgot about that trunk full of hopes and expectations. Eton was a good soldier and died proudly; Eton was a Renegade. But I will always remember him as the shy, wide-eyed boy who first stepped into Hogwarts, taking everything in all at once. Farewell, Justin’ she finished hoarsely, her

gaze down. Without even looking, she swished her wand and Eton's coffin approached the arch, hovering before it as if it were asking permission.

'Farewell, Justin,' the Renegades echoed.

'Farewell, Justin,' Harry repeated to himself.

Owl nodded and pulled her wand backwards, not bothering to hide the tears that were running down her cheeks as Justin Finch-Fletchley's coffin crossed through the veil and disappeared.

She stepped down and walked away as another Renegade took her place and started to talk about his best friend in the Renegades, Hound. Harry tried to pay attention to what he was saying, but his eyes kept gazing back towards Owl. She was standing alone at the back, her body leaning on a tree. She was crying, and she also looked angry. She was alert and wary, which was something that confused Harry. Why would she be like that at a funeral?

Harry heard a distant 'farewell, John' and repeated the words, berating himself for letting his mind go off again at a funeral. He was positive he didn't know anyone at Hogwarts named "John", but that man had given his life to the cause; he could at least respect him at his funeral.

A movement caught his eye and his mind wandered off again. He glanced sideways and saw a figure approaching Owl. The person was hooded and he couldn't see the face under it, but he would bet it was a man. He walked towards her silently, but Harry noticed he was slightly duck-footed, as if he carried an injury. The newcomer and Owl started talking in hushed voices, and even though Harry strained his ears he couldn't hear a thing.

Owl was tense, and by the look of it, they seemed to be talking about something very important. Then again, if Owl wasn't paying attention to the funeral of her fallen teammates, it had to be very important.

Harry studied the man. He wasn't very tall, but something about him imposed respect. He didn't move much, but when he did, he could see that the injury must be really bothering for he didn't seem that well coordinated. Perhaps he had been injured in their last battle. Harry shook his head; that couldn't be possible. There was something about that hooded figure... He was sure he would have recognised him if he had seen him before. He had to be some Renegade from another house, most likely one of the captains.

Owl was wringing her hands, and he could see that she was speaking very quickly, whereas the other figure simply nodded mutely. Owl knotted her fingers behind her head and sighed, shaking her head.

Harry's eyes nearly bulged out of their sockets when the imposing man under the hood spread out his arms and hugged her tightly. Owl didn't respond at first, but after a second she hugged him back.

He didn't have enough time for wrapping his mind around what he had just seen before the hooded man disappeared. Still staring at the same spot, he flinched when Owl's eyes turned to look at him. He quickly turned his head back to the coffins, but he knew that Owl was walking up to him. He wasn't really looking forward to being berated by her for eavesdropping on them, he really wasn't.

'You were eavesdropping,' Owl stated next to him in a low voice, promising doom and gloom. He cast a small look at her, but she simply stood there with her arms crossed, her eyes set on the Renegade who was pushing another coffin into the arch. Her lips were pursed tightly, and Harry could see that he had stepped into

something he shouldn't have.

Harry sighed; he could deny it, but was there really a point? She knew it was true, and he knew it was true, so it would be better to get on with it and move forward.

‘Yes, I was,’ he admitted.

Owl nodded and turned to him, her eyes flashing. ‘Not a word,’ she whispered menacingly, making Harry gulp.

He nodded. ‘Not a word,’ he promised meekly.

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Monday, 28th of December 1998

ARTEMIS: ‘Britain will never fall’

By Justina Jugson

I sat calmly at one of the Ministry's rooms, waiting. I was nervous. I was going to meet and interview the second most important person in Britain. I would be lying if I said I wasn't scared and honoured at the same time. I was jumpy and jittery, praying to Merlin that everything would go all right. This was probably the first time she was going to be interviewed, so I had absolutely no prior knowledge about how to act around her.

I could feel her the moment she entered the building. My Pureblood senses went haywire, the air was simply buzzing with magical power. It's something difficult to describe; I had only felt this once before: when our Lord took his rightful position and gave a speech in the Ministry. I remember it well; his magical power was intoxicating and commanding for anyone who has pure blood running through their

veins.

I was waiting for Artemis, the huntress and Lord Britain's Heiress. I had never seen her or been around her before, but I have to admit that everything about her is true. She is powerful; beyond powerful and the quill in my hand was about to snap because of the magic that was being poured into the air. My glass of water and the glass of wine for her were shaking, and so was I.

It didn't take long for Artemis to enter the room. Let me just tell you, I'm glad she is on our side. She wore her trade crimson robes that covered her from head to toe, only leaving her deep red eyes visible. Across her chest was the string of the gleaming white bow she wore on her back, along with her black arrows. She may not be very tall, but her petite figure certainly commands respect.

She sat gracefully in front of me and nodded at me, waiting for me to start asking her questions. I was a little too awed by her presence and it took me a very long time to react to her inquisitive eyes. Fortunately, she possesses her Father's understanding and patience.

'I'm very grateful you managed to find a spot for us, Madam Artemis. We know you are very busy,' I said weakly.

She just looked at me, perhaps amused at my nervousness, and nodded. 'The people in Britain deserve to know what's going on,' she stated. She crossed her legs and placed her hands on her knees. 'Father works for the people in this great nation, and we should keep them informed.'

I smiled, maybe for the first time. I could start feeling my nerves calming down. It's hard to be in the presence of someone like her. It's surreal. This is one of the people who make this country work; this is one of the women who make sure we are able to live our lives

normally; this is one of the people who make this great nation prosper and keep away our enemies.

‘Our readers are very interested in the course of action against the terrorist group “the Renegades”. Could you please tell us something about it?’

Artemis didn’t move an inch. ‘Of course, you already know that Lord Britain assigned me to this mission?’ she asked patiently, waiting for me to nod at her. ‘The situation with them is worrying, indeed; but the Renegades remain a crippled, minor rebel group: leaderless, coarse, uncultured - Mudbloods.’

I fidgeted a bit. I took a deep breath to calm myself, and voiced the thoughts of our readers. ‘But Madam Artemis, they did attack our soldiers at Inchmurrin and killed everyone -’

Artemis shook her head slightly. ‘The numbers have been vastly incorrect. Upon their arrival, our specialists first believed that the corpses all belonged to our brave recruits; but upon further inspection, they realised that ninety-five percent of them were Renegades. Proof of how animalistic and primitive they are, they thrive on mutilating the cadavers of their own people. Cannibalism wouldn’t be out of place with those criminals.

‘There were only thirty-six students plus Aphrodite in the settlement, whereas the whole force of the Renegades was there. It was two hundred Mudbloods against thirty-six of us – so of course, by brute strength in numbers, they won.’

I nodded. That did make sense. There could be no other reason why our side was defeated. No matter that the Renegades are simply Mudbloods, two hundred against thirty-six makes the outcome very clear. I huffed in anger; only scoundrels like them would have the

lack of décor in attacking innocent students like that.

However, I still had some doubts. ‘Madam Artemis, there is also the thing about them being able to thwart the Fidelius Charm, supposedly unbreakable unless the Secret Keeper chooses to divulge it?’

Artemis rose her glass of wine to me in salute and put it down without removing her hood to take a sip. ‘Excellent question,’ she stated, ‘and we already have the answer for it. As you know, the Renegades are a force composed of Mudbloods. It is common knowledge that the foul blood that runs through their veins poisons the brain, and thus their intelligence is not above that of a monkey,’ she said silkily. ‘The only explanation for it is that a Pureblood Disgrace is aiding them.’

My eyes nearly bulged out of their sockets; for the ancient blood in me, I could not understand that. ‘A Pureblood could stoop so low so as to befriend and help those mongrels?’

Artemis nodded almost imperceptibly. ‘Outrageous as it seems, it’s the truth. Monkeys aren’t able to foil something as complicated as a Fidelius Charm, no matter how well trained they are. Thus, only a Pureblood could have done it. We suspect it’s a Pureblood from the continent, since all of the Disgraces in Britain are under control.’

I was too shocked to speak. Thankfully, she didn’t expect me to and kept explaining.

‘Our intention is to cripple this treacherous Pureblood – my intention is to catch him. Without him, the Renegades will fall, one by one. The slight threat the Renegades posed will be over.’

‘This is just a bit overwhelming,’ I said feebly.

Artemis nodded. 'I understand, but rest assured, this matter will be over soon and Britain will never fall.'

[...]

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Harry was glad to leave Cherry Lane and arrive at the only place he felt at ease in this unholy land, the house he owned near Edinburgh. It was not the Burrow, nor Hogwarts, but it was a place where he could remove his Unspeakable robes and be Harry; not Gryffindor, just Harry.

Kreacher was more than happy to see him back, and he could only smile at the elderly elf's antics. Of course, he was also incredibly grateful when said House-Elf planted a mouth-watering meal in front of him.

He cricked his neck while eating; he was tired and had been through an emotional rollercoaster. He needed some time away from the madness that was this world, some time alone to think. He was thankful that Neville had chosen to stay with the Renegades, because what Harry needed was to be alone. He felt guilty about those thoughts, but he just wasn't used to being around so many people all the time.

Kreacher was mumbling something but Harry tuned him out. It was not a nice thing to do, considering how helpful the elf was, but he was just weary. Munching on a piece of bread, he realised that things were just too different for him to understand.

He had been an idiot to believe that, like last time, once Voldemort was dead it would all be over. There were still many Death Eaters around and, perhaps even worse, Death Eater supporters. Harry crushed the crumb of bread in his hands in anger. He had been reading what the media said, and he simply couldn't believe the lies

printed in the Daily Prophet. The problem was, he was sure most of the population believed it.

It was so with humans, it always had been and always would be. One individual can speak for himself and voice his own opinions. The mass only mutter, too afraid to say anything. Give them too much freedom, and it becomes mayhem; rule by the hand of fear and they will obey, no matter what.

Perhaps before it wasn't so Voldemort took over. Perhaps people didn't accept things blindly then. But too much time had passed since then, too much time receiving heavily biased opinion for people to realise it was not the truth. The Purebloods were living in paradise and would not protest; the Half-bloods had forgotten they had a voice of their own and deserved better than being treated as slaves. The Muggleborns? They were either dead, hiding, or enrolled in the Renegades.

To some extent, Harry understood the Purebloods. It was difficult not to, because aside from their idiotic purity theories, they were just humans. It was the same thing present in every living being powered by a nervous system, complex or not.

He realised what it was all about. Every living being wants to survive, and wants those of his same blood to survive. In order to do that, considering the world as the ground for competition, living being must be better than their neighbours. Animals would rely on brute strength for that; the loser dies whereas the winner remains standing. It was bloody and crude, Harry admitted, but it lacked the intricacies and deceptions humans are capable of. Either you are strong or you aren't. So, to that extent, it would be objective.

Harry didn't notice that he wasn't alone anymore, or that Kreacher had taken all the food and dishes away, believing he didn't want to eat anymore. Harry was so lost in his own thoughts that he didn't realise the cup of tea he was holding was already empty, and that he

was looking rather foolish sipping from it.

He was frustrated; with each thought he became more and more frustrated. Humans and other species capable of highly intelligent thought would be subjective, he reflected. Sighing, he realised that humans are the most wonderful creatures on the earth, and, at the same time, the most disgusting. Humans have the same instinct that animals do to survive, but they take it to a whole new level. Humans aren't satisfied with beheading their former leader; no, they need to make him look inferior to themselves. They need others to believe they are inferior, and that they are the best.

Humans want to survive, but considering the world they have built, they also want to live as comfortably and relaxed as possible. Royalty wouldn't exist if there were no paupers, for example. Muggle warlords for instance, used the most ridiculous - subjective - excuses for overpowering entire nations, excuses such as skin colour or religious beliefs. Harry highly doubted that those who wielded great power really cared if someone was black or white, but about what they would gain from it - namely, money. However, gritting his teeth, he realised that they made the mass believe in the nonsense they were sputtering.

Wizards were the same as Muggles. They may not care about skin colour. Instead, it was blood, the so called "nobility" or lack thereof flowing through people's veins. And that was the reason a psychopath like Voldemort could rise to power, because there was already a population waiting for him.

Harry thought Voldemort would have been all for Muggleborns if they were the ones who controlled the wizarding world; but, really, who has a more prominent standing in the wizarding world, the one who was born in it, nurtured by it and grew in it, or the poor and lost Muggleborn who stumbles upon it at the age of eleven, eyes wide in surprise when he realises that dragons and fairies exist?

‘I would advise you to steer your thoughts and body away from that plant, Harry,’ a voice said behind him, startling him.

Harry turned back and saw Dumbledore sitting in a chair in front of him. Bewildered, he wondered why he hadn’t noticed him before.

Dumbledore smiled benignly at him, as if guessing his thoughts. ‘Ah, when one takes the journey into their minds and unravels mysteries and thoughts he had never believed possible, I daresay one can get lost in the most wonderful and destructive of labyrinths.’

Of course, his old Headmaster had to say something as cryptic as that. Choosing a more neutral field, Harry glanced at the aforementioned plant. In front of him, next to the sink, was a pot with some kind of greyish weeds sprouting from the earth.

‘What is this?’ Harry asked, wondering what had made the Headmaster talk about it as if it were something dangerous.

‘That is one of Mr Longbottom’s experiments. One that, if I’m not too mistaken, he intends to use on Bellatrix Lestrange,’ he explained calmly, and Harry quickly got away from it.

‘When did he start doing this?’ Harry asked, gesturing towards the numerous pots that were perched all over the kitchen, wondering why he hadn’t noticed before.

Dumbledore rose from his seat, and Harry could see he was still weakened by his stay in Azkaban. His movements weren’t fluid, they were somewhat jerky. But still, he was much better than before.

‘Soon after he arrived. Mr Longbottom has been very dedicated to

having a say in the outcome of this war and he is, as Barty Crouch Junior once advised you to do, playing to his strengths,' Dumbledore explained, glancing over his half-moon glasses at the weedy plant on the sink. 'It is a sad day for any teacher when we encourage our students to explore their knowledge and creativity for the sake of a war,' he said sadly, waving a hand over the plant, making it burst into life. All the greyish colour was left behind, and it shone green and yellow.

Harry nodded, not knowing what to say. Glancing at Dumbledore, he noticed that he had a wand in his left hand. Harry's curiosity had been piqued. Where had he got his wand from? Originally, he had intended to give the Elder Wand back to Dumbledore, but something made him hesitate. Perhaps he really was its rightful master, or perhaps he was being selfish. In any case, the wand stayed in his trunk, and he had never retrieved it. He couldn't bear to think of what Voldemort would do with such a powerful weapon in his hands. At least, last time it didn't work for him, but now, if he won it in a duel before the end...

'Perhaps you are perplexed to find me in possession of a wand, Harry,' Dumbledore spoke, still gazing at the plant, 'Fawkes gave me my old wand back, the wand I was given more than a century ago when I first stepped into Ollivander's,' he explained, turning to face Harry and smiled slightly. 'I suppose the Elder Wand is in your hands.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Good, you will need it,' he added enigmatically. 'But for the moment, I would like to test my erstwhile favourite student. If you please, would you duel with me?' he asked.

It took Harry a few seconds to register Dumbledore's words. He understood the meaning, but it just seemed like a very outlandish thing to say. Dumbledore had never duelled with him before. He had taught him things about Riddle's life and talked with him. But duelling?

‘Sir?’

Dumbledore gazed sombrely at him. ‘In the not-so-distant future, Harry, you will have to face Lord Voldemort again. In all probability, sooner than we both expect; and I have to make sure that you are ready. Here, you are nothing but a bad nightmare for him; because of that, Lord Voldemort will not tread as softly around you, he will give you his worst.’

Harry nodded, understanding what Dumbledore meant. Suddenly, he cringed. Harry wasn't as golden as he used to be, and he knew very well how much Dumbledore despised the Dark Arts.

‘I am well aware that in the situation you are in, I cannot expect you to remain loyal to what I would consider ideal use of magic. I can only ask you not to fire any curses at me that would cause me an immediate death or the Cruciatus Curse.’

Harry stepped back in revulsion. ‘I would never Crucio someone,’ he said vehemently. Then, he fell silent and remembered the Carrows. ‘Well, at least I would never Crucio non Death Eaters.’

Dumbledore smiled at him as he led the way to the backyard. ‘Excellent, Harry,’ he said while opening the back door. ‘Even if your hands must be stained, never forget your principles.’

In no time, Harry stood in front of his former Headmaster, ready to duel him. Wand clutched tightly in his right hand, he bowed slowly,

never taking his eyes away from Dumbledore. If there was something he had learned at the Duelling Club, it was never take your eyes off your opponent.

Harry studied him while he was bowing. Although better, Dumbledore hadn't fully recovered. He was still extremely thin and somewhat greyish. He didn't exude the power Harry was used to feeling in his presence. Instead, he looked like a caricature of his former self.

'Expelliarmus!' he yelled, pouring a feeble amount of magic into the spell.

Harry found himself bound and gagged on the floor, not knowing how the hell that had happened, in less than a millisecond.

Dumbledore approached him and released him from that state, offering a hand to pull him up. Harry took it and stared at the professor, utterly flummoxed.

'First mistake, Harry. Never underestimate your enemy,' Dumbledore said kindly yet sternly.

He waved his wand around him and Harry's jaw dropped. Dumbledore had been using a Glamour to appear weaker! Without the charm, he was almost as Harry remembered, all the greyish tinges gone.

Dumbledore chuckled at Harry's expression. 'Sometimes, it is the right approach to look weaker in front of your enemy. They tend to look down on you, believing it will be an easy and quick fight. However, as you may have noticed, that may not turn out as they had expected.'

Harry nodded, taking that piece of information in. 'I get it. Even if my

opponent looks weak, I have to hit it with everything I've got,' he said.

'Yes, that is one way to put it,' Dumbledore agreed, walking back to face Harry for a second time.

Harry breathed in deeply and focused on beating Dumbledore.

'Glisseo!' Dumbledore levitated himself. 'Stupefy!' Dumbledore ducked. 'Vortex! Fractum! Expelliarmus!'

Harry's eyes bulged and he rolled over the floor, a barrage of curses missing him by an inch. He went to get up, but he had to duck to the ground again. Dumbledore was giving him no truce, no moment to catch his breath.

'Bloody old man,' he cursed, rolling over as two yellowish beams nearly hit him. Every time he tried to get up, Dumbledore would fire another curse in the direction of his head, so he had to duck again and keep rolling over the grass.

A Stinging Curse hit him and Harry gasped, his reflexes slowing down. He got hit again, even as he tried to roll over, and then a third time. He scrunched his eyes and disappeared in a ball of flames.

He reappeared behind Dumbledore a second later. 'Imperio!'

Two seconds and one very sore bum later, Harry found himself tied up again. He groaned. That bloody cunning Headmaster was quick. Were people over a century old allowed to be so fast? Harry didn't think so.

Dumbledore freed him in no time and helped him up. Peering at him over his half-moon glasses he asked, 'What was your second

mistake, Harry?’

Harry was annoyed that he had been beaten so badly, but he knew better than to be petty. ‘That I yell the spells instead of casting them non-verbally. Something Snape always berated me for.’

‘Professor Snape, Harry,’ he corrected him, making Harry give him a small glare. ‘Indeed, against a weak enemy, you would have no problems in “yelling”, but against someone else, you should always try to produce them non-verbally,’ he explained softly. ‘However, I must also compliment you. Flaming is something that your enemies will not expect and will not be able to stop, no matter how many wards they create.’

Harry nodded, a small part of him glad to receive a compliment from Dumbledore.

The Headmaster furrowed his eyebrows pensively. ‘I am afraid, though, that while your technique to catch me off guard was excellent, the spell you chose was not.’

Harry nodded grimly, silently chastising himself. ‘I should have known better. You are a master Occlumens; Imperio against you is as useless as Lockhart trying to do a spell.’

Dumbledore smiled in approval at him and thankfully didn’t choose to correct him this time for his lack of respect towards his old Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher. If you could call that teaching, mind you.

And so, Harry readied himself for round three, more humbled than he would have thought possible. Perhaps that was one of Dumbledore’s aims: his last mission was a success, and he was being lauded as a great fighter by the Renegades; perhaps Dumbledore wanted to bring him back down to earth. Perhaps he wanted Harry to realise

that no matter what others believed of him, he had to be focused on the rival in front of him and not let himself get carried away by his previous deeds. What mattered was the present – and if he failed, it would cost him his life.

He took a deep breath and faced Dumbledore again. Slowly they began to bow, each stalking his opponent's movements like jungle cats. He held off his smirk and decided to break the rules: he attacked before the bow was over.

Dumbledore ducked quickly and sent a white beam at Harry, followed by a string of Stinging Hexes. Harry knew better than that and flamed to Dumbledore's side; sticking out a leg and aiming at the knees he made his opponent buckle and flamed away before he could get caught by another hex.

‘Expelliarmus! Impedimenta!’ he thought as he rolled over the floor again. ‘Fractum! Diripio!’ Harry was caught by a yet another Stinging Hex, but he barely acknowledged it. ‘Electro! Bates Mocosi!’

He panted, flaming away. He knew he had been hit several times by Dumbledore's Stinging Hexes, but he couldn't allow himself to waver. Dumbledore, the bloody evil coot, kept springing up and rolling as if he were a twenty year-old athlete.

Harry found himself in a prison of water. He yelped, he was running out of air! ‘Focus, Harry!’ he thought. ‘Fire, of course!’ He sent waves of heat with his hands and the prison melted, throwing Harry to the floor. He rolled, avoiding another curse.

Wand at hand, he went to play dirty. ‘Aesssstussss Bassilissk!’ he cried in Parseltongue. He had never tried that spell, but he congratulated himself: a fifty-foot long snake made of fire was pretty impressive. ‘Attack the non-ssssspeaker!’ he ordered it, just in time to dodge another hex thrown his way.

He would have liked to watch the fire creature he had created, but he focused on attacking Dumbledore, who seemed quite busy getting rid of the fire basilisk. 'Stupefy! Mens restum!'

Dumbledore was in trouble and he knew it, making Harry smirk slightly. 'Expelliarmus!' he cried in victory when Dumbledore's wand flew right into his hands, elation sweeping over him.

He claimed victory way too soon.

A whirlwind of incredible force hit his brain. Harry yelled in pain as he felt his mind defences break, a foreign consciousness taking over his body. He tried to keep it away with all his might, but it felt like one thousand sticks hitting him all over his body and Harry fought hard to remain in control of his body. His knees buckled and he collapsed to the ground.

He writhed on the ground in pain. One by one, he felt each of his muscles shut down, not responding to him anymore. He couldn't feel most of his body, and the pain was slowly fading away into nothingness. He felt locked, slightly claustrophobic in his own mind.

He battled against the foreign presence for the control of his eyelids and he saw that Dumbledore was looking at him with such an intensity it was frightening. The old blue eyes didn't blink, his face never wavered, whereas his hands were busy moving and shooting beams of light at the fire snake.

Sadly, he watched as a small tsunami swept over the basilisk and destroyed it and felt two wands flying from his hands into Dumbledore's hands, just as he felt himself being surrounded by ropes again.

'Do you yield?' Dumbledore asked as he walked over, his wand

pointing at Harry's neck.

Harry glared at him, but he felt himself unable to move his head. He blinked furiously, silently telling his former Headmaster that of course he did, what else could he do?

The foreign presence snapped and left Harry as his ropes disappeared. Harry relaxed and took a deep breath, the feeling of claustrophobia fading.

‘Well, Harry, that was a most excellent display. Congratulations, my boy!’ Dumbledore said jovially, handing him his wand back and pulling him up.

He really wanted to glare at his Headmaster, but he was entirely too tired for that; instead, he chose to smile weakly at him as he stretched his legs, revelling in the feeling of being able to control his body.

‘I thought I had you with the fire basilisk,’ he confessed sheepishly while sitting on one of the chairs Dumbledore had just produced along with a chair. ‘But the mind control thing you pulled on me? I couldn’t break it.’

Kreacher appeared immediately with a tray of tea and biscuits, slightly dazed, and placed them on the table in front of them. Without further ado, he left and went back to the house.

Dumbledore smiled. ‘To be frank, Harry, I wasn’t expecting such a display of power and I had to resort to underhanded tactics.’ At Harry’s inquisitive look, he explained. ‘The art of Legilimency is not solely about “reading” another person’s mind. It is much more complicated, much more fascinating, and much more dangerous than that.’

He sipped his tea calmly, a pensive frown on his face. 'The technique I used is a slightly modified version of one of Lord Voldemort's favourites. I implore your forgiveness for the pain I caused you, Harry – but you must know,' he said, a pleading expression on his face.

Harry shrugged, not really understanding. 'You took control over my body; Voldemort has done that before.'

Dumbledore shook his head gravely, his beard swinging around. 'I didn't just immobilise you, Harry, I pushed your conscience and caused you claustrophobia, did I not?'

Harry nodded.

A haunted look crossed the elderly professor's eyes. 'I apologise again for the pain I caused you, Harry. It is not something I wanted to do. But you have to prepare yourself against Voldemort's mental weapons, and simple Occlumency is not enough.'

He sighed. 'What would you have felt if, instead of locking your conscience in a place in your mind I kept pushing it, or perchance sucked it out?' he asked rhetorically. 'It is perhaps one of the cruellest forms of mind rape, perhaps even worse than the Cruciatus Curse. It's an abomination – and one of Lord Voldemort's favourites.'

Harry understood then and felt completely repulsed by the idea. He knew that Voldemort was evil, but to take pleasure in such a thing was beyond Harry. He wasn't even sure if someone as twisted as Bellatrix would like it. Scratch that, Bellatrix would love it.

'I will help you master Legilimency, Harry, because you will need it. I do not want you to learn the cruel intricacies of the art, but you must learn about them in order to be able to defend yourself. Your mind is your sanctuary, and Voldemort will never respect it.'

Harry felt fifty years older all of a sudden. Whenever he thought he had something down, he found out that there was always something more to it. Suddenly, looking for the Horcruxes seemed like the easiest and safest task he had to do.

‘I will not burden you anymore today. After this duel, you should rest and let your mind dream and wander,’ Dumbledore stated, rising from his seat. ‘I am very pleased at how proficient you are becoming and will keep training you, helping you hone the skills you will need to survive this war. We shall discuss more about this duel on the morrow; but for now, we must both rest.’

Harry nodded tiredly as he got up, levitating the tray behind him. Exhaustion had begun to sweep over him and he could feel his vision starting to get blurry.

‘Thank you, sir. For your help, I mean,’ he slurred.

Dumbledore patted him on the back. ‘Quite all right, my dear boy. I must say, I admit that my magic and body have been getting rusty; but after this most magnificent duel, I imagine that next time I will be in a much better shape,’ he said cheerfully.

Harry groaned.

-oOoOoOoOo-

DISCLAIMER: I have Flobberworm blood in my veins. JKR has Dementor blood. Ergo, I’m not JKR.

-oOoOoOoOo-

A/N: and another chapter is done, wooooohoooo. It isn’t my favourite

chapter, but it was necessary. I had to explain several things.

One; even though Owl is a kick-arse Hermione, they are not the same person. It's a bloody war, and thus they cannot remain the same. I hope I did a decent job on her.

Two; I'm bloody nervous about the fighting scene with Dumbledore. It just doesn't seem to satisfy me, but I have changed it and modified it so many times I'm not sure I can remember my own name. Please do tell me what you think or if there is some way I can improve it. I love Dumbles, he's a smashing dear old fellow – but really difficult to write.

Three; I love Artemis. As in I 3 3 3 3 Artemis. Well, at least the idea of the character. We get a first glimpse of her in this chapter, woot woot. Remember her bow and arrows, some of you may want to kill me because of it.

Four; I got my two first flammers ever. I should have figured it was bound to happen at some point. I'm all for constructive criticism (seriously, I love it, I want to improve). But flaming isn't really that cool, especially if A) the flamer can't even get the HP facts right; and B) I'm criticised because of my British ways. Ever heard Emma Watson speaking? Same accent, minus that hypnotic eyebrow movement. Anyway, constructive criticism is bloody brilliant and I love it when I get it, but flaming? Pish-posh, not so cool.

Five; I'm bloody ecstatic about the response the previous chapter had. So thank you very very very much! I didn't like writing this chapter half as much, but it was necessary. However, I'm already jumping up and down about the next chapter. Let me just tell you this, chapter thirteen is a key to this story, as if we had gone from stage one to stage two. WOOOOOHOOOOOO. I can't wait, wooot wooot! Plus, it'll be a long chapter, hooray.

Six; my muse is evil. She's on holidays in Majorca. Evident much,

huh?

Seven; honestly, I'm a goofball, a total clown. Why am I unable to write funny stuff? I blame it on my evil muse.

Until next time,

Vermouth

Member of the Siriusan Order

(REVISED: 05/07/2009 – thanks, Hasufel!)

Chapter Thirteen

Into the Abyss

Very far away, beyond the solid English soil under Harry's feet, in a world no longer touched by Voldemort, stood a house held up only by magic. The frail and reddish walls shone brightly with the first indigo rays that filtered over the horizon, the tattered and old stones basking in its warmth and their cracks gleaming proudly like old veteran scars. The roof was covered by loose and battered tiles, and every now and then a stray sparrow would chirp and pop in and out from the home it had built underneath the tiles. The windows were numerous and smoky, an unearthly and alluring light in them.

Small chickens pecked tiny bugs from the grassy soil, while garden gnomes could be found crawling stealthily around the messy garden. From time to time, a stray cat could be seen prowling around, glancing at the chickens with a predator look.

In any other circumstance, this scene would be taken as the epitome of morning serenity across the British countryside. Everything seemed to be at peace, calm, quiet, tranquil – seemed.

If one cast aside the pretty sight the dawning sun produced, one would notice that the state of the landscape was far from idyllic. As soon as the first soft morning rays soared above and stopped warming the old house, it was plainly visible that the dwelling had seen better days. The gleaming, proud stones were long gone, they were replaced by rusty, dusty and cracked walls. The tiles were broken and dirty, and only the most adventurous of sparrows dared to live underneath them anymore. The windows were no longer mysterious, but looked black and very dirty, with smudged patches on them. Some had even been shattered, and the shards were scattered on the ground below.

The chickens were skeletally thin and ragged, and even though they

were constantly pecking at the ground, there was no green grass or little bugs to eat. The garden was dry and derelict, with mounds of mud, dry sand and cracked earth. The grass was mostly yellow; few green tips could be seen. The cat, previously graceful and nonchalant, had a half-crazed look in its eyes, starvation taking a toll on it. The fur on its back was patched and crusty, as if it had got into too many fights.

The house used to have a small pond where many different fish lived; some magical, some not. It used to have translucent waters that allowed the life that lived in them to be seen. For years, the children that lived in the house had gone to the pond to have innocent fun, and had squealed in joy each time they played with the fish and frogs and other things that lived in it. But the pond was now dried up and muddy, the corpses of the fish rotting lazily on the bottom, emanating a putrid smell that not even vultures would find appealing.

The trees that surrounded the property were no longer tall and green, with many leaves and bird nests in them. It was the landscape you would expect to find in a remote place, forsaken by men and ravaged by nature – but not the sight you would expect to see in green and rainy old Britain. The previously wild yet cared for household was in shambles, as if it had been attacked by earthquakes and tsunamis; uprooted trees laid dead on the ground, dried heavy branches strewn across the cracked soil, unmoving birds squashed by them.

The house and its surroundings were called “The Burrow”, and inside the dwelling, on that cold and crisp January morning, the people whom Harry thought of as family were awake, dishevelled and alert.

Hermione Jean Granger wrapped her nightgown around her as she descended the staircase leading to the dining room. She treaded on the steps carefully, over-flexing her knees and moving her feet gently, trying to make as little noise as possible. She grimaced when the stairs creaked under her weight. She detested that sound. She

promised herself that whenever she found a place of her own, she would make sure that no eerie sounds would come from the furniture. Hermione liked peace and quiet; and the smell of pines and roses and coffee in the morning. As much as she loved the Burrow and her parents' place, she knew that she was already nineteen and should start thinking about her future.

She shook her head and snapped herself out of her reverie. Shivering, she wrapped her arms around herself tightly. She hadn't been herself ever since Voldemort died, but it was only after Harry left that she had really noticed the changes inside her. She was sometimes swept by an intense rush of pain, focused on her heart, and she felt as if her very core was going to be ripped off. She would double over and gasp, and before she could start thinking what was wrong with her, the pain would fade. Usually, that is. There was once when the pain was so excruciating and so lasting she collapsed and passed out.

Hermione felt clammy and ill at all times, and for the life of her, she couldn't find a possible reason for it. Of course, she had had many wild theories, but each seemed as unlikely as the next. She winced when she reached the bottom of the staircase; another surge of pain had assaulted her again. Fortunately, this time it looked like it would only last a second.

Rubbing her stomach, she walked towards the kitchen, where she thought the rest of the family would be. She sighed sadly at the state of the house. No matter how hard Mrs Weasley worked to keep her home habitable, there seemed to be some unknown force that liked to wreak havoc in it. The Burrow had never been as immaculate and pristine as her home, but despite the slightly messy and illogical things scattered about, there was something about the Burrow that made her feel at ease. Perhaps it was the soft fumes emanating from the kitchen, signs of Mrs Weasley making breakfast for her incredibly large family. Perhaps it was the excited smile that played on Mr Weasley's lips when he saw her, no doubt wanting to ask her how

some Muggle gadget worked.

Perhaps it was simply that she had been welcomed by them with open arms and considered one of their own. When it came to Muggleborns, the magical world seemed to be divided in three kinds of people. The first were the Pureblood supremacists who believed she was nothing but scum that should be eradicated. They wouldn't even consider her human, with the right to think and have an opinion. She smirked slightly. Those inbred bigots had been defeated.

The second group was made up of people like her: Muggleborns, Halfbloods and Purebloods who believed in Dumbledore's legacy. They had fought for the idea of a world where the level of inbreeding wouldn't determine the quality of an individual, for a world where actions mattered instead of spawning from the right male and female.

The third group encompassed most of the Light Purebloods. They had fought on the same side during the war, but now that it was over, it was clear to everyone that they were not as open-minded as they seemed. They were against everything Voldemort stood for and believed that Muggleborns had a right to learn magic and live in the Wizarding World.

But.

There was always a but. In this case, after the war, it was clear that the Light Purebloods with whom she had fought didn't think she and the rest of the Muggleborns were good enough to make an impact on their world. They looked at her with condescending and patronising smiles, as if she were some sort of cute and helpless little puppy and not the witch whose unlimited brainpower could very easily leave them looking like half-evolved baboons.

She huffed indignantly. After Voldemort died, it had all been smiles and hugs. Not too long after his demise, the new government had started to rebuild itself, with Kingsley on top of it. For a short period of

time, it seemed that everything would be all right. But it wasn't.

The Purebloods wanted power, the economy was destroyed, corruption started spreading through the Ministry officials – and Hermione had watched all of this with terror in her eyes. She bit her lip as a thought crossed her mind, but she couldn't deny that after the fated Boy Who Lived had disappeared, everything had spiralled backwards.

In the mind of Hermione Granger, there was something that just didn't make sense, and it all seemed to be connected to her friend Harry Potter. There was no logical reason for it, and as much as she hated considering the idea of something as wobbly and unfathomable as Fate, she suspected it had something to do with it.

Hermione pushed the door that led to the kitchen gingerly, one arm wrapped around her midriff, holding the nightgown tightly to her body.

The sight that awaited her was not one she was unfamiliar with. Half of the Weasley family was already in there, with the exceptions of Bill, Charlie, Percy and Ron. Charlie was at St. Mungo's getting a check-up since he was suffering from the same mysterious illness that had gripped Hermione, only on a smaller degree; Bill was at his cottage with his wife, Fleur, and newborn daughter, Victoire; and Ron... Hermione smiled wistfully. Ron was probably still sleeping soundly in his bed. Percy, to everyone's surprise, had quit his Ministry position and was very efficiently handling the twins' shop in Diagon Alley. Perhaps he was not the most amusing of sellers, but he was most certainly a capable businessman.

Mrs Weasley was fretting in the kitchen, her wand moving haphazardly as pots and pans arranged themselves over the stove. Mr Weasley sat in front of the table, one hand holding a cup of tea while the other flicked over the pages of the newspaper in front of him, his forehead creased in thought. In front of him, George was half-naked in his underwear and sprawled on a chair, an emaciated

and zombie-like version of himself, his eyes staring unblinkingly at the ceiling. In his hand, tightly clutched, was the pointer that had fallen off the Weasley Family Clock the moment his twin had died. A few seats away from her father, Ginny sat with her head resting on her hands, asleep.

Hermione cleared her throat. 'Good morning,' she croaked.

'Good morning, dear,' Mrs Weasley greeted her motherly.

Mr Weasley lifted his head and smiled kindly at her, small crinkles at the edge of his eyes. 'Good morning, Hermione. How did you sleep?'

She shrugged her shoulders in a very Harry-ish way as she grabbed a mug. 'As well as expected, Mr Weasley. Any news?' she asked, a kettle in her hand to make herself some tea.

Mr Weasley shook his head defeated. 'Nothing of relevance, no,' he said, sipping his tea. He frowned and added, 'They should be writing what's happening, and not just speculating and throwing the Quaffle around.'

Hermione plopped onto the chair next to George and placed her hands around the steamy cup, enjoying the leafy and aromatic fumes that emanated from it. 'Skeeter and Baines again?' she asked sympathetically.

He scratched his chin, clearly irritated. 'If only. I wish it were those two gossiping hags. It's Elladora Capellarius again. As if the situation isn't bad enough as it is, this – woman – has to barge in and cause an even greater pandemonium!' he said darkly, scrunching his nose. 'I don't know why I bother reading this anymore,' he huffed and brandished his wand, levitating the newspaper and muttering 'Incendio!'

She sighed. Every morning, Mr Weasley would go over the Daily Prophet, skim through it, become annoyed at the outright lies printed in it and would proceed to incinerate it. Even though she agreed that reading the papers was useless, she could understand why he still had it delivered to his home.

Mr Weasley became especially peeved when the mysterious Elladora Capellarius wrote an article. They had never heard about that reporter until the end of November, and from then on, she had only caused mayhem. Unlike the infamous Rita Skeeter, Capellarius did not thrive on gossip and warmongering; no, she was deadly accurate in what she published and managed to twist the facts in such a way that they were completely believable and, to the average reader, they were the truth printed on paper. Of course, to a person as highly intelligent as Hermione was, she could see that it was all a bunch of rubbish – but masterfully done.

However, the reporter's last name caused somewhat of an upheaval at the Ministry. "Capellarius" was a very old Pureblood name, supposedly rooted in the Ravenclaw line, but the family was defunct and had been so since the Goblin Rebellion of 1787. Claiming such a name without the right to do so would not only break out a media war, but it was punishable by law.

Hermione had done her homework, and the only Wizarding line that could possibly claim such a last name was the Rosier Family, defunct since the last one of them, Evan Rosier, had died when he was apprehended by the Auror Alastor Moody.

Despite those staggering facts, Hermione knew that something was amiss. "Elladora Capellarius" was no Muggleborn or Halfblood. She was certain that woman had been raised as a perfect Pureblood; her style and remarks were proof enough of that. They were acid and apparently straight to the point, but if one took a closer look, it was nothing but a sea of well-woven words that when read, would make the reader believe she had said something, when in reality it was the

reader all along who put the words together and formed an idea in his mind. Hermione had to applaud that warped psychological technique. Her style reeked of Slytherin strategy and Pureblood dances. Whoever that woman was, Hermione knew it would take a lot to bring her down.

She sighed and pushed her thoughts away from that media warmonger. She stretched her arm and picked the nearest teaspoon. She dipped it into a bowl of sugar and then poured it into her tea, smiling slightly at the face Ginny would make if she saw her defiling the drink. Hermione pursed her lips, amused. If Ginny were awake, she would look at her in mock contempt. In Ginny's opinion, tea was a sacred beverage that should never be besmirched by any sweeteners or milk. In Hermione's opinion, Ginny was probably channelling her mum and her ideas of a proper and very English breakfast. Hermione snickered blithely at Ginny's would-be haughty face.

She gasped and clutched her chest. 'Ouch!'

'Hermione!' Mr Weasley was quick on his feet and rushed to her side and grasped her free hand, while Mrs Weasley dropped her pots and ran towards them, worry etched on her round face she started rubbing soothing circles on her back. George turned to face her, horrified but unmoving. Ginny woke up with a start and quickly got on her feet to stand by her side.

Hermione was hyperventilating, the pain searing through her was getting worse. She hunched forward until the counter was barely an inch away from her face. She could barely breathe and she could feel her eyes bulging from the pressure underneath her breastbone. It was a ravaging pain; she could swear that she would feel better if her heart was ripped out of her chest. It was as if her insides were being tugged at, and at the pace it was going, she wouldn't be surprised if her organs bulged out from her body.

She gripped the end of the table forcefully, breaking one of her nails, but she didn't notice it. Her breathing was laboured and her lungs were constricted. She coughed hoarsely, trying to find some relief, but she couldn't. Her mind began buzzing and she could feel her consciousness starting to ebb away...

But as quickly as it had hit, the pain left her and she was able to breathe again, coughing soundly with each intake of air. Without saying a word, she hastily grabbed her wand and conjured a bucket in front of her, before she emptied the contents of her stomach in it. Disgusting, she thought.

'I'm alright, I'm alright,' she squeaked.

Mrs Weasley shared a look with her husband and then turned back to Hermione. 'Dear, perhaps it would be best if you lay down for a while –'

'No, Mrs Weasley,' she croaked, regaining her composure, 'I'll be alright, I'll be fine. I just need a couple of minutes and I'll be as fit as a fiddle again,' she lied. She pointed her wand at the bucket and muttered 'Evanescio!'

Mrs Weasley pursed her lips and walked to the nearest cabinet. Hermione tore her eyes away from her and quietly thanked Mr Weasley and Ginny. She open her mouth to say something to George, but he was already staring transfixed at the ceiling again. She closed her mouth and turned to Mrs Weasley who had just planted some evil-smelling potion in front of her.

She gulped it down and started to feel better immediately. 'Thank you, Mrs Weasley.'

‘It’s no problem, dear,’ she beamed at her fondly. Turning to her husband, she said ‘Arthur, could you please get Ron? Breakfast is almost ready.’

Mr Weasley nodded briefly and went to fetch his youngest son. Hermione, meanwhile, felt warm spread through her body at the thought of Ron. The small tentative steps they had started taking as a couple after the Battle of Hogwarts had yielded very positive results. Hermione snickered lightly at the face Ron would pull if he heard her talking about their relationship like that. In any case, even though they were still awkward from time to time – too much contradictory and twisted history between the two of them – they had managed to pull through and, step by step, they were building a solid relationship.

It hadn’t been easy, though. Especially since Harry was not around to play peacemaker between the two of them. They still bickered and fought like cat and dog, but now they both knew that they cared for each other. And let’s face it: bickering was tremendously fun and exciting for the two of them.

Hermione was snapped out of her thoughts when a very exhausted Mr Weasley appeared, pushing his outlandishly tall and obnoxiously sleepy son to the table. Ron was wearing a very rumpled night shirt and a pair of maroon pyjama bottoms that were cut a couple of inches above his ankles. His longish, vibrant red hair was bedraggled and messy in a way that resembled Harry’s bird’s nest of a head. Hermione blushed when she realised she had let her stare wander and turned her gaze sharply to the counter, trying to get rid of her red-tinged cheeks.

‘Gonmong,’ Ron slurred, slumping on a chair next to her. ‘How you?’ he asked drowsily, crashing his hand on top of hers.

Embarrassed yet very pleased, she grabbed his hand and swiftly

moved it under the table to rest on her knee with hers. Ron didn't seem to mind (in fact, Hermione bet he hadn't even noticed her quick move, since he was now snoring on the counter) and if Mrs or Mr Weasley noticed anything, they chose not to say a word. Ginny, however, did catch her action and winked at her.

Mr Weasley cleared his throat. 'Right, it's time for me to get ready and leave.' He kissed his wife's cheek and then turned to the rest of the occupants. 'I have a meeting with Kingsley,' he explained. Then he narrowed his eyes at George and frowned. 'George, get up. Percy told me this morning that you had to be at the shop at ten sharp.'

George didn't even spare him a glance, but did as he was told and left the kitchen to get dressed. Hermione felt horrible for him, but he had to let go of his pain and start rebuilding his life again. She couldn't even imagine what it was like to lose a twin, but she knew that if George didn't start to pick up the pieces of his life, things could only go downhill from there.

Mrs Weasley placed an extravagantly full plate in front of Ron, packed with bacon, eggs, kippers and other foods. Hermione smiled fondly when she saw that Ron – who was snoring with his mouth wide open and a bit of drool trickling down from it – grabbed a spoon unconsciously and started shoving food into his mouth, not even bothering to open his eyes. Proof of how far she had come was that she hadn't jumped to scold him yet for his appalling lack of manners and etiquette. Ron was quaint in a caveman manner; despite that, he still made her heart flutter.

'So dears, what is your plan for the day? Studying again?' Mrs Weasley asked.

Ginny gave Hermione a sideways glance and then shook her head. 'No, today's our day off!' she said nonchalantly.

Mrs Weasley pursed her lips. 'Ginny, even though Hogwarts is closed this year you shouldn't be leaving your studies aside –'

She waved a hand dismissively. 'Mum, you know as well as I do that we have been studying and working for hours on end. If I spend one more hour with a book, I will end up with the social skills of Madam Pince. Or worse – Percy. You don't want that,' she finished theatrically.

Hermione sent Ginny a grateful look. She knew it was because of her and the illness that had taken over her that Ginny was postponing their studies. She had never thought that a time would come where she would be relieved not to open a book.

Ginny pulled her hair into a ponytail and faced her mother. 'I think that we will relax and perhaps do a bit revision. Kill our brains trying to decipher why we can't just get to Harry, and what is wrong with Charlie and Hermione.' Her face turned pensive for a fleeting second. 'Alright, so Ron and I will relax while Hermione will try to figure that out,' she concluded, sticking her tongue out at Hermione.

'Quidditch,' Ron grunted.

Ginny grinned. 'I'm not singing "Weasley is our King" again, Ronniekinns,' she joked and then turned to her mother. 'I guess we will just have a lazy day. Merlin knows that Hermione needs to learn that lazy doesn't equal heresy!'

Hermione snorted as she rose to help Mrs Weasley clean up the kitchen. Oh, she already knew what being lazy was. She had been friends with Ron and Harry since she was twelve, hadn't she?

Soon enough, Ginny and Hermione were trudging up the stairs, a still very drowsy Ron lagging behind them. They parted at the landing of the first floor and Hermione went quickly to her room – Bill's old room

– to get some clean clothes and take a shower. Stepping into the bathroom, she braced herself and forced herself to look into the mirror and see her own reflection, which she had avoided at all costs for the past three and a half months.

She gasped when she saw herself in the mirror. She was nothing but the cadaverous image of her former self; it was ghastly. Her infamously bushy hair was lank and devoid of life. She touched her cheek with her spidery fingers and felt nothing but the form of her zygomatic bone under her dry skin. Her lips were crusty and chapped, her figure skeletally thin. Her skin was clammy and greyish, giving her an unearthly look. But worst of all were her eyes, sunken and hollow, with an eerie light to them.

Hermione tore her eyes away from her reflection and sought refuge in the warmth of the hot water the shower provided. She had been spooked by her appearance, and there was no way she could deny it. She wondered why the others acted normal around her when she resembled a hairy Dementor.

Truth be told, she had no idea why she had fallen ill. She had no idea either why only Charlie and Luna Lovegood were sickly too, only to a lesser extent. She had done her research, but there was no magical or Muggle disease that could explain her symptoms. Her magic had been hindered, she could barely cast a spell – yet she wasn't suffering from magical exhaustion.

Ever since Harry disappeared, she had worked herself to death so that when she was with him again, she could do her best. However, the weird illness that had taken over her was progressively diminishing her life force and there was nothing she could do about it. She had visited Muggle doctors and the best specialists St Mungo's could provide – nothing. She could feel it in her bones; it was as if life was being sucked away from her body.

She hadn't voiced these thoughts, but she knew that whatever was

going to happen to her would happen soon. A part of her mind – a part she tried her hardest to ignore – told her that, whatever illness had hooked her would not leave her and that soon, her time would be over.

Hermione turned the water hotter, practically boiling. She would drown that thought.

-oOoOoOoOo-

Sometimes, Harry really wished that banging one's head against the nearest wall would be considered normal and perfectly acceptable behaviour. But alas, some things were just not meant to be.

He was exhausted, and dropped into his bed with splitting headaches almost every night. Dumbledore was to blame for that; not only he was pushing him to near magical exhaustion every single day, but he was also attacking his mind, with the flimsy excuse that he was teaching him the arts of the mind. Harry now knew why Dumbledore was the only wizard Voldemort had ever feared. Harry himself was beginning to dread seeing his former Headmaster, the sight of him making him cringe.

On New Year's Day, he had been contacted by Owl, who had told him that Squeamish and Dragon had tracked down another Death Eater camp, and would be attacking it on the eighth of January. To Harry's surprise, he was actually looking forward to it. Anything to get rid of the evil coot also known as Professor Dumbledore.

Deep down, Harry had to admit that he was deeply grateful towards the old Headmaster. He had trained extensively and his skills were almost unparalleled; but in this world, Voldemort would not tread softly around him. Whenever he encountered him, if he displayed an unusual amount of skill and power, Voldemort would do his best until Harry was six feet under. If Voldemort discovered who he was and realised that his nemesis was back – a fully-trained and powerful

nemesis – he would employ all the vast knowledge he had gathered during his life.

Harry knew that Voldemort liked the Unforgivables, but against someone as trained as Harry, they could only get him so far. The Unforgivables, contrary to popular belief, were not unblockable. True, if you were hit then you were a goner; but if you were able to keep your wits and be fast enough to dodge them, then you would be spared. Because of that, Harry was incredibly grateful for his quick reflexes and agility. If you had asked him ten years prior to that moment, he would have laughed at the thought of Dudley's "Harry Hunting" game coming in handy someday.

He shook his head in amusement as he rolled the duvet over. He cricked his neck and winced at his sore muscles. With a visible effort, he pushed himself off the bed and opened the curtains, grinning when he saw a thick layer of snow outside.

Tossing his pyjamas and undergarments aside, he grabbed a clean set of robes from somewhere around the war zone that was his room. Harry stretched his body and left his room, yawning obnoxiously, headed to the bathroom for a quick shower. Gasping, he realised that, considering he no longer lived alone in this house, it wasn't the best idea to prance around naked.

Later at breakfast, Harry would swear over and over that the blush that covered his face was due to the extremely hot bath he had taken.

He arrived at the kitchen, smiling slightly at the countless pots scattered around it. His kitchen had been literally turned into a greenhouse. It used to be a fairly simple kitchen, packed with indispensable things and no decorations: a sink that overlooked a window, a table in the centre, chairs and the whitest walls you would ever see. Since Neville showed up, it was more like a jungle. A jungle in pots, but still a jungle.

‘Saw the rubbish in the Prophet yet, Harry?’ said Neville, walking through the kitchen door with a piece of toast in one hand, the newspaper in the other. He slumped down onto a chair, disgust etched on his face. ‘This is bloody ridiculous! How can Voldemort’s birthday be more important than Christmas Day, for Merlin’s sake?’ he cried exasperatedly.

Harry nodded, while taking a sip from his cup of tea. The truth was that he hadn’t expected the country to be out in the streets in fervour, celebrating Voldemort’s birthday. He even wondered if he cared about that. But the extent to which people manifested their joy on the thirty-first of December was simply outrageous. From the tumultuous and cheering crowd, you would expect that something grandiose had happened: like the end of the war, for instance. But no, there were overjoyed because, eons ago, Voldemort had the bad taste of being born. People were bonkers in Harry’s opinion.

‘Yeah, the Daily Prophet here is worse than back home,’ said Harry, chewing on a bit of toast. ‘The Death Eater propaganda published here is so blatant it makes me want to throw up.’ As if on cue, he imitated puking noises all around the table. It took him a while to calm a distraught Kreacher, who, seeing Harry with what he believed to be a severe bout of nausea, went into a crying fit, thinking he had poisoned his master.

Neville chuckled at the pair’s antics and opened the newspaper again. Not less than ten seconds later, he was already grinding his teeth and muttering threats. Harry wasn’t sure why Neville had taken a liking to getting angry in the mornings; perhaps to make up for his usual lack of aggressiveness?

‘Whoa, whoa – what’s got into you?’ asked Harry, when he saw

Neville tearing up a page.

‘I hate this – I hate that everyone is sad about poor Bellatrix Lestrangle because she lost her brother-in-law, as if she is just some innocent woman!’ He growled, pure hatred on his face. ‘I hate it that nobody remembers that she destroyed my family – twice!’

Harry winced. ‘Don’t worry Neville, she will get her comeuppance,’ he said reassuringly.

Neville muttered under his breath but didn’t say anything else about Bellatrix. He focused on the newspaper, hissing from time to time.

Harry didn’t really know what to say to him: in one world, his parents had been driven to insanity; in the other, they had been killed. Was there anything he could do to soothe Neville? No, there wasn’t. Especially because, technically, Harry wasn’t an orphan anymore. He was brought out of his thoughts when he noticed that Neville was talking to him.

‘Sorry. What was that?’

‘I said, what do you think of this Artemis person?’

Harry frowned, scratching his hand bemusedly. He put his mug down. Staring into space he sighed, pulling his thoughts together. ‘I don’t really know, Neville. These Unnameables are something we are not used to. There is Voldemort, then the inner circle and then the rest of the Death Eaters. There isn’t much difference between the inner circle and the rest of the Death Eaters, only that the former have bigger Gringotts’ accounts, heavier names and more refined techniques. But the Unnameables? They sound like Voldemort’s extended arm – especially Artemis.’

‘I know, it’s just weird. I always thought that nobody could be closer to Voldemort than Lestrage, but it turns out we were wrong.’

Harry nodded. ‘Exactly.’

Neville scratched his head. ‘What I don’t get is why Voldemort would have an heiress. Isn’t he supposed to be immortal?’

Harry shrugged noncommittally. ‘I don’t know. Perhaps he wanted someone who would never betray him, no matter what happened. If you can’t be loyal to your family, you can be loyal to nobody, right?’ he asked rhetorically.

‘I guess,’ answered Neville, unconvinced. Flapping the newspaper with a frown, he turned back to Harry. ‘Who do you think they really are?’

‘Their identities you mean? Number Three is Bellatrix, even if someone else was posing for her. But as for the other four, I haven’t got the faintest.’

‘Yeah, same here. Well, number five seemed a lot like Draco Malfoy; but he’s dead, had a huge funeral even. Yeah, I researched it,’ he added, noticing Harry’s inquisitive eyes at that comment.

‘Whoever they are, they are bad news. Especially Artemis. From what I read in the newspaper, she seems like the female version of Voldemort: red eyes, manipulative, sly, conniving, powerful, arrogant, assertive... and the list goes on,’ said Harry, resting his back on the chair. ‘Whoever she is, she is going to make the outcome of the war

ten times more difficult than it already was,' he muttered, defeated.

Neville massaged his temples absent-mindedly. 'Doesn't it feel like once we sort things out, ten thousand more problems spring up to hit us in the face?'

Harry grunted in agreement. 'No kidding.'

A comfortable silence filled the kitchen. Harry closed his eyes, basking in the lack of chatter. He could hear Kreacher rustling at the sink and Neville flipping the newspaper pages over from time to time. He stretched his legs under the table and crossed them, allowing his body to get rid of the tension, trying not to think about when the Headmaster from hell would pop up for their next lesson.

'How are you holding up, Neville?' Harry asked, eyes still closed.

Neville smiled weakly at him. 'You mean besides being completely confused?'

Harry arched an eyebrow. 'Confused?'

Neville nodded. 'How would you describe your mental state if you are pulled from everything you know with only a few items – including a Mimbulus Mimbletonia – and landed in a place where Voldemort is Merlin, Dumbledore is in Azkaban, Hermione is some super assassin birdie, and Luna is not just mental, but plainly psychotic?'

Harry laughed. 'Well, when you put it that way...'

Neville grinned. 'Seriously, I wouldn't be surprised if Trelawney turned out to be the Head of the Department of Law Enforcement, or Umbridge proclaimed her love for centaurs.'

Harry snorted. Those two things were as likely as Voldemort handing

out sweets. Still, the mental picture of Trelawney in an immaculate suit along with a neatly trimmed moustache was pretty amusing.

‘Look on the bright side. At least Owl isn’t pestering us to do our homework and coming up with screaming schedules for us.’

Neville seemed to ponder his words very carefully. With a serious expression, he nodded at Harry. ‘Anything for a quiet life.’

They both laughed hysterically at that comment. It wasn’t really that funny, but both of their nerves had been stretched.

Unfortunately, Harry’s fun time was cut short. Professor Dumbledore, no doubt guided by their raucous laughter, must’ve realised that both boys were awake and entered the kitchen with a bright smile. His blindingly yellow robes made both Harry and Neville shut their eyes synchronically, thus avoiding having their optic nerves being burnt because of the Headmaster’s vivid robes.

Harry and Neville watched Dumbledore's breakfast quirks, transfixed. After grabbing a couple of slices of bread and dipping them into butter, he proceeded to grab a full jar of marmalade and spread it over the heavily buttered bread. He then dropped what seemed like two stones of sugar on it and made a sandwich fit for Dudley.

‘A healthy breakfast, a healthy mind,’ Dumbledore said merrily, sipping from his mug, something in it that resembled Polyjuice Potion.

Both Neville and Harry, deciding it was safer not to look at the Headmaster while he was eating, busied themselves by helping Kreacher clean up the mess they had made. Kreacher of course, would have none of it, so Harry decided to “help” Neville with the many plants he had placed all over the house.

‘So what is this one for?’ he asked, pointing at a thorny... thorny thing that had taken residence in the nearest bathroom. Really, there wasn’t a better word to describe it. It was a red ball with lines etched all over it, no stem, no leaves. Plants were supposed to have those two, weren’t they?

Neville chuckled. Placing his head at the thing’s level, but maintaining a healthy distance, he whistled softly.

Harry jumped back and exclaimed in surprise. The red ball wasn’t a ball anymore. That thing had split apart, becoming the most hideous flower he had ever seen, and probably the most dangerous, according to Neville’s explanations. Neville kept whistling, and Harry could see a dark stem growing from the earth at inhuman speed. The flower itself was also growing quickly, until it reached the healthy size of a human head. Looking at it carefully, Harry could see that the petals had tiny red teeth, almost invisible unless you were looking for them.

‘It’s only the initial phase, Harry. But this plant is for seeping magic out of someone –’

‘Turn a wizard into a Muggle?’ Harry blurted.

Neville nodded grimly. ‘It’s not yet developed, and it doesn’t always answer to my commands. It’s in an experimental stage at the moment. I can’t use it until I’m positive that it will only attack my enemies and not backfire on myself.’

Harry was shocked. He hadn’t known that plants could be used that way. He hadn’t known either that Neville could create such things. He was most definitely more talented than anyone could have thought –

and he also had a very nasty streak. Still, Harry was fascinated by it; if it worked, it would save them a lot of trouble.

‘Mate, this is bloody brilliant!’ Harry exclaimed, awed at Neville as he whistled again, watching as the plant dwindled and became a red ball again.

Neville beamed and then frowned. ‘This is not exactly how I wanted my Herbology career to go...’

Harry winced. ‘Yeah, I know. I never pictured myself practising the Dark Arts,’ he said sadly, a rush of shame searing through him.

Neville smiled sadly. ‘Come on, I have man-eating plants to pot and you have a lesson with your would-be assassin.’

Harry groaned.

-oOoOoOoOo-

Hermione stirred. A sudden movement under her head caused her to wake up. With a herculean effort, she opened her eyes and realised she had fallen asleep on Ron’s shoulder. She blinked in confusion; when they had sat on the couch for some light reading, she hadn’t realised she was so tired. Still, a warm sensation swept through her, making her feel safe and cosy.

Night was falling quickly. The fire was lit and she basked in the warmth of the glowing embers, snuggling closer to Ron. The strong flames licked the wood ablaze, slowly annihilating it yet making it look so pretty.

She turned her head slightly to gaze at Ron. It made her smile when she saw him with a thick tome on his lap. His left hand and stare lingered on the page he was reading, while he silently practised

wand movements with his right hand. He seemed to notice her fond gaze and turned to her, the edge of his mouth turning upwards.

‘Hey. Did I wake you up?’ he asked quietly.

Hermione beamed at him and shook her head softly, careful not to make her senses spin. ‘What are you reading?’

Ron frowned. ‘I’m trying to master the wand movement behind the Perimeter Shield Spell. I am doing something wrong, but I just don’t know what,’ he said, frustration leaking from his voice.

Hermione sat up instantly, ignoring her protesting muscles. ‘Show me,’ she said briskly.

Ron smiled mischievously at her. ‘Of course, Professor Granger,’ he teased, making her roll her eyes. He dropped his manner a second afterwards and scrunched his nose in concentration. ‘Protego Circumscriptio!’

Nothing. Hermione frowned. ‘Well, the incantation, timing and the intonation are both perfect. Do the wand movement without the incantation.’

Ron obliged and drew his wand. He performed a quick circular twirl and added a slashing motion at the end.

She arched an eye brow. ‘What area are you visualising?’

He stared at her blankly. ‘Er, do I have to visualise an area?’

She chuckled good-naturedly. ‘Of course you do, silly. It’s all about intent with magic. You have to see perfectly in your mind what you want to protect – see every corner in your brain. If you want to produce a shield for a rectangular room, you need to have the image

sharp in your head and then produce a rectangular movement with your wand. The slashing motion comes when you pronounce the “go” at the end of “Protego”. Try it again, picturing a small area.’

Ron nodded and closed his eyes briefly. ‘Protego Circumscriptio!’ A blue beam of magic shot from his wand and morphed itself into a circle that penetrated the carpet in front of them, making it gleam slightly.

Hermione squealed delightedly. ‘You did it! Well done!’

He grinned at her. ‘So Professor Granger, what is your verdict?’

She smirked at him. ‘Ten points to Slytherin!’

Ron gasped. ‘What?’

Hermione chortled and ruffled his hair. ‘You are silly.’

Ron huffed in mock annoyance for a minute and then dropped his demeanour. He gazed at her fondly and kissed the crown of her head lightly. ‘Thank you. I was going bonkers trying to understand what the bloody book was saying.’

Her skin felt white-hot where his lips had touched her, and she felt somewhat embarrassed that, after months of dating, he still caused that reaction on her. ‘You are welcome.’

‘Seriously, I spent hours trying to do this spell, and the bloody book would just drag on and on and not explain anything about picturing an area. Stupid book!’ He protested, glaring at the tome on his lap.

Hermione chuckled lightly. ‘Where’s Ginny?’ she asked suddenly.

Ron shrugged. ‘Out in the courtyard, duelling with Luna.’

‘Oh. Shouldn’t we go there to supervise it? In case they get hurt?’ she suggested.

‘Nah. Ginny’s old enough, she doesn’t need us to chaperone her. Plus, Bill is outside checking the wards.’

Hermione opened her eyes widely, surprised. ‘Bill is here?’

‘Yeah, mum asked him to come over to go through the wards. So don’t worry about Ginny and Luna, they’ll be fine,’ he told her comfortingly, placing an arm over her shoulders and drawing her closer to him, making her shiver.

Ron frowned. ‘Are you cold? Let me conjure you a blanket. Lodix!’

She blushed lightly. ‘I-I wasn’t cold, but thanks,’ she stammered, covering her body with the blanket.

His cheeks turned red and they both looked away, an uncomfortable silence spreading through the room. Hermione set her eyes on the Weasley Family Clock, where ten hands were. It should have been eleven, she thought sadly, her mind drifting to Fred Weasley. She forced herself away from those morbid thoughts and focused on the newly added hands on the clock: her own and Harry’s. She smiled sadly: Harry should have been there too to see his own pointer in the clock. She could just see him in her mind: he would be dumbstruck, unable to say anything, because he would be so touched and moved he would lose his ability to speak.

She sighed. She missed her best friend. It just wasn’t the same without good old brave and good-hearted Harry around. Ever since he had vanished at the last equinox, they had thrown themselves into

their books, practising and learning at the most ungodly of hours. The Weasley family had all got into it too, along with Neville and Luna. They were determined to do their best, so that when the time came, they could help Harry.

Glancing at the tattoo on her arm, she smiled weakly. Of course, Harry wouldn't see it that way, but she had to admit that he had the most loyal of devotees. They were all literally killing themselves to prepare for the upcoming war – including George. Most of the adults still had their lives to contend with, but they somehow managed to do everything at once.

She was frustrated that no matter how hard they all tried to get to Harry, they hadn't managed it. Each time Hermione tried, she felt a wave of sickness spread through her. The same thing happened with Charlie and Luna. Ginny, on the other hand, confessed that when she tried, she could only feel a whiplash of cold and dread. The rest of the Weasleys, however, said that they felt a block. She had tried many times to decipher what that meant, but she was no closer to coming up with a plausible reason.

Her mind wandered back to Harry. Merlin, she missed that moody git. She couldn't even begin to imagine how Ginny must be feeling, with her boyfriend gone.

Everything seemed to have gone crazy ever since Harry left: the Ministry was in shambles no matter how hard they tried to rebuild their world, the economy was destroyed to the utter bafflement of the goblins, people were deathly sick (including her), the weather was out of control... It all seemed linked to Harry, but why?

Her brain just couldn't come up with a feasible reason. And Merlin, she missed her best friend. Christmas had been very subdued without him in their midst. And when Neville vanished, it had spiralled downwards. Professor Sinistra, Justin and others had started disappearing too and nobody – not even them, who were extremely

well informed – could explain it.

She glanced at the clock again. Eight hands pointed at home, two at “Mortal Peril”: Harry and her own.

She knew she was sick, but the hand on the clock only reminded her of it. And she hated it. She hated the increasing doubts that plagued her mind, the fear that she might leave this world at the age of nineteen. She –

‘I’m worried about Ginny,’ Ron interrupted her thoughts, his face filled with sorrow.

She nodded. ‘Me too. She has thrown herself into this, it’s almost an obsession,’ she said sadly. ‘Seeing her duelling with reckless abandon, not caring if she is bleeding or hurt... it just scares me to death.’

Ron nodded and pressed her closer to him. ‘I know. I can’t blame her. If it -’ he looked at her timidly, ‘if it were you in Harry’s shoes, I would be the same. I don’t know if this is stupid, but even though I’m dead worried about Harry, I feel guilty that I’m not working as hard as Ginny is -’

‘Don’t,’ she interrupted him harshly. ‘Don’t – just don’t. You are working yourself tirelessly. Seeing you with a book at every waking hour and muttering spells in your sleep is so unlike you it’s downright eerie. Ginny has a motivation neither of us do – even though Harry is our best friend.’

He looked puzzled at her. ‘Er, a motivation?’

She smiled kindly at him, clasping his hand and squeezing it slightly. Boys could be so endearingly oblivious sometimes. ‘Your sister is

very much in love with Harry, Ron,' she whispered softly.

Ron's ears turned pink. 'But she is only seventeen!' he cried, aghast.

She rolled her eyes at him. 'So? Look at the history between those two. Age doesn't matter in this case.'

He muttered something incongruently under his breath. He faced her with a pained expression on his face. 'Can we leave the topic about my baby sister and my best mate being a lovey-dovey couple alone? I don't want to have kissy-kissy nightmares,' he whined dramatically.

She rolled her eyes again. 'Honestly, Ron. You sometimes have the maturity range of a teaspoon!'

He smirked mischievously at her and wrapped both of his arms around her in a vice-grip, his face looming close to hers. 'Still a teaspoon, eh? So what utensil would be if I told you that I would very much enjoy giving Ginny kissy-kissy nightmares about the two of us, hmm?' he asked huskily, waggling his eyebrows at her.

She flushed red. 'I- I' she stammered.

'At a loss for words, eh, illustrious Professor Granger?' he teased, pulling her towards to him, slowly closing the gap between them.

'Ron!' she scolded half-heartedly.

'What will you do, professor? Land me in detention?' he asked hoarsely, his lips barely an inch away from hers.

Hermione couldn't think. Her mind, for the first time in her life, had gone completely blank. She could only register that Ron's nose was

spattered with freckles and that his lips were dangerously close to hers.

Her mind exploded when he kissed her, an electrical bolt cursed through her spine. Her head was hazy and her thoughts distorted, she could only feel the acute sensation that spread from her lips to the rest of her body, an overpowering tingle running through her. She couldn't help the throaty whimper that escaped her lips when she felt Ron's mouth seeking entrance to hers, nor could she resist it when he laid her softly on the couch and pressed his body to hers, his weight covering her completely.

The usually huge logical part of her brain had been subdued, although it did kick in from time to time. We shouldn't be doing this here where we could get so easily caught, she thought briefly – but it was quickly silenced when Ron grabbed her leg and wrapped it around his waist, their bodies coming even closer than they were before.

Satisfactorily crushed under Ron's weight, Hermione decided that kissing him was the best feeling in the world. Nothing could compare to it. She squirmed in pleasure underneath him, a slow, rumbling sound spreading through her belly.

Hermione ran her hands through his hair and used her leg to crush him against her, all sense of proper and décor forgotten. She arched her back when one of Ron's hands went under her shirt and caressed her side, waves of heat spreading through her body...

Hermione felt a brief stabbing sensation on her midriff, but she chose to ignore it, since she was too busy kissing Ron to think about small discomforts. One of her hands left his hair to anchor itself on his belt, while her foot trailed up and down the length of his leg.

The pain in her abdomen started worsening, and it felt damp to her. But she refused to let her sickness destroy the moment she was

sharing with Ron. She placed her other hand on his cheek and kissed him fiercely, panting heavily.

Ron broke it off. 'What the – Hermione!'

At first, she was angered that he had stopped with his ministrations, but then she followed his stare. She gasped.

Her stomach was covered in blood. Dark red blood oozed from her abdomen soaking her clothes and now that the pleasure was over the pain kicked in with a force.

'HELP! HELP! HERMIONE'S HURT!' Ron yelled, jumping to his feet and trying to perform every healing spell he knew.

She looked at him with pleading eyes, silently begging him to help her as the rest of the inhabitants barged in, their wands at the ready. She couldn't see their faces, but the horror dripping from the voices was enough to tell her it wasn't a pretty sight.

'Ron! What happened?' Ginny demanded, frantic.

Ron stamped on the floor, as he tried to perform yet another Episkey on her to no avail. 'I don't know. Episkey! Sano! Episkey! She just started bleeding -'

'I'll go and get the healing potions from the cabinet!' Mrs Weasley cried. 'Bill, Arthur, help me!'

Ginny ripped off the cloth over her stomach and told Ron and Luna to cast healing charms all at once in sheer desperation, but it didn't work. She could feel the wound closing up with each spell only to burst open a second afterwards, making her scream in agony. She

lifted her head a bit and saw that she had a deep wound on her stomach, the flesh at the sides of it green.

Her eyes bulged out –

‘She’s been poisoned!’ Ginny shrieked.

Hermione thrashed, excruciating waves of pain running through her. She writhed on the couch, panting. She screamed; something was moving inside her, dissolving her organs. The throbbing pain was acute and her breathing became laboured, her strength rapidly decreasing –

‘Ron, do something!’

‘What? It’s not working!’

Her eyelids fluttered, the voices around her becoming hazy and distorted, the figures turning blurry. The pain wasn’t receding, but her brain was suppressing it, consciousness slowly ebbing away as her mind started to shut down.

She opened her eyes wide and gasped, her back arched in pain, a silent scream on her lips, her legs thrashing in one last moment of torture. She couldn’t take it anymore, she was about to explode, nothing mattered anymore –

And so, when she saw a distant white light accompanied by distant cries of fury at the back of her eyes, she embraced it with all her might and plunged into it recklessly.

Hermione Jean Granger died that night on the couch at the Burrow, on the fourteenth of January, surrounded by the people she loved.

Her body relaxed and slumped back down on the sofa as her eyelids closed and her arm fell limply to the floor, blackened blood still leaking from her body, morbidly staining the carpet below.

The smoky silhouettes of a phoenix, a basilisk and a lion appeared out of thin air and encircled her body in a furious and frenzy mist.

Black flames licked her body and it vanished with a flash of light.

One world away, the Renegade known as Owl collapsed.

-oOoOoOoOo-

DISCLAIMER: Skiing is just wicked. There's nothing as liberating as skiing: there's you, your guts and the white nature below your feet. It's almost untouchable. It's one of the few moments when no-one else's matters, it's only you and that powerful feeling cursing through you.

Which is why I felt really annoyed when Dumbledore appeared by my side and made me crash into a tree. Why do JKR's characters feel like popping up whenever they want to, sending me into my death?

-oOoOoOoOo-

A/N: and another chapter bites the dust. I apologise for the mistakes, my beta-reader hasn't been able to go through my chapters lately.

Originally, I would consider this chapter half-done. The original plot I had in my mind for chapter thirteen was not this; this is only half of it. But the chapter was just getting too huge so I have had to split it in two. I'm sorry for the cliffie, but at least take comfort on the fact that I've already written a large part of the following chapter. Also, the final scene of what will be chapter fourteen – I have been itching to write it for a year, woot woot. So I do hope it'll be a quick update.

I received a PM from a user that got me quite worried. I have no idea if I ever gave that impression, but I don't like character-bashing. This user was disappointed because he/she saw no Dumbledore-Ron-Hermione bashing, and I couldn't help but wonder where the blazes did this user get the idea that this story had bashing from?

My reasons for not liking bashing – usually – it's because I think that we sometimes expect Harry's friends to be perfect – but they are not. They are human. I prefer depicting their flaws and virtues without degrading them. I like 3D characters, which is what I'm trying to do with some of the characters in this story. Bashing is for 2D characters, in my opinion.

Hermione is brilliant, bossy and sometimes and insufferable know-it-all. But she is also loyal and with a high sense of morality and compassion. So she may be annoying from time to time, yes. But my mum is annoying too and I wouldn't like her being bashed for the world.

I have no idea if I am explaining myself well enough. I just want to let it known that there isn't any character bashing in this story. Well, perhaps Umbridge, but she doesn't count.

I have to add that I am humbled. The amount of people that are reading this and adding it as a favourite or an alert is simply bloody flattering and overwhelming. Thank you very much for your support. Please please review?

As usual, for any of you that might be interested, there's a link to my Yahoo! Group on my profile page, the address is:

[http://groups dot yahoo dot com forward slash group forward slash Vermouth underscore Fanfiction](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Vermouth_underscore_Fanfiction)

Until next time

Vermouth

Member of the Siriusan Order

(REVISED: 06/07/2009 - by my brilliant and amazingly talented beta.
Thanks, Hasufel!)

VERY IMPORTANT A/N, DON'T SKIP IT: considering how often people say that "Unmentionable" reminds them of underwear, I have decided to change the name into "Unnameable" Better? Also, the timelines between canon world and Harry's unholy land are different. Canon world: 14th of January; Harry's world: 5/6th of January. Timelines will "converge" again in the next chapter.

Chapter Fourteen

The Dangerous Games We Play

Under his Invisibility Cloak, Harry made his way to Hogwarts, aiming for Hagrid's cabin, at dusk on the fifth of January. Despite it being mid-winter, it was unseasonably warm. That afternoon, Britain had been graced with a heavy downpour and even after it had ended, the air that lingered was thick and moist, slightly stuffy.

He felt jumpy and uneasy, and had practically been dragged to do it by Neville and Dumbledore. After many hours and arguments, the Dumbledore-Longbottom team had won when they stated that he had been given a second chance and that he should be bloody grateful for it since neither of them had been so lucky.

Still, he was uncomfortable. He knew he was being given the chance of his lifetime, but how was he supposed to reconnect with a godfather that had been murdered in front of his eyes; a brother he had never even imagined of and, most difficult of all, a father that had given his life to protect his wife and only son when he had been one?

Harry didn't truly understand himself. A part of him told him he was dreaming, that suddenly he would wake up and be an orphan again and that everything would go back to normal once more. Another part of him didn't want to wake up from that dream.

The night was chilly but starry, no clouds above. The moon shone brightly – a full moon – casting an unearthly light over the Black Lake.

If he squinted his eyes, Harry could see from time to time the tip of a tentacle breaking the surface of the otherwise completely still black waters. Harry glanced ahead. The Forbidden Forest looked quiet and eerily calm for a full-moon night; no howling, no growling or other beastly sounds. The leafy treetops swayed lightly with the night breeze, filled with susurrus and telling tales from ancient times.

Harry narrowed his eyes, half in distaste, and half in longing when he set his gaze on his old school and home – now disgracefully named “Slytherin School”. Long ago – or at least for him it seemed like a lifetime ago – when he had been a student, the castle had shone brightly and proudly. Gleaming solid stones formed the imposing yet homely shape of Hogwarts. White turrets and towers basked in the warmth of the first rays at sunrise, while at dusk they reflected the light the moon and stars provided. Torches hung from the walls and towers, illuminating the paths ahead. The old castle, the mere presence of it, always managed to produce a warm smile on Harry’s lips; but now, it made him cringe.

Slytherin School was gloomy and foreboding. The castle reeked of Voldemort’s stench, making Harry scrunch his nose in revulsion. The building stood tall and as magical as always, but instead of being the epitome of warmth and welcoming, it looked like a depraved caricature of its former self. The stones were blackened and filthy. If Harry had been heading towards the castle instead of Hagrid’s cabin, he might have realised that the reason for it was that blood stained the walls; a remnant of a long past battle.

The light the torches cast was dim and otherworldly, the flames oddly still instead of the dancing patterns he was used to. The iron gates were no longer shiny but rusty and unclean, stray bits of metal dangling pitifully from them. The roof looked as if it had seen better days and the gargoyles perched at its edges no longer looked quaint and somewhat amusing, but malicious and derisive.

But what made Harry’s blood boil was the banner that hung just

above the gates. The old and polychromatic Hogwarts' crest and its eccentric motto ("Draco Dormiens Nunquam Titillandus") had been erased. Instead, depicted on an enormous piece of cloth that seemed almost carved into stone, was the image of a deadly-looking snake with its fangs poised, coiling around swirling green flames, ready to strike. On top of the flames, an inverted eight lay, the symbol of eternity. Below the snake, the coat of arms was emblazoned by sharp silver letters reading Δεν βρέθηκav λέξειζ.

Ancient Greek, Harry realised, Voldemort uses the language of the ancient wise wizards for his own, self-invented crest!

‘As presumptuous and arrogant as ever,’ he muttered darkly. For all he knew, seeing as Ancient Greek was only used for the highest and most important topics and basically nobody ever learnt more than one or two words, it might as well be saying “Voldemort is a sexy-sexy hunk”.

Harry snorted; he doubted that Voldemort had ever been plagued by the usual teenage drama. After all, he supposed that in the mind of the teen Tom Marvolo Riddle, what could possibly be so interesting about hormones, girls and Quidditch when you had relatives to kill, Basilisks to set loose on the Mudbloods and illusions about being the supreme ruler of the universe?

Tearing his eyes away from the defiled castle, Harry walked down the winding path that led to Hagrid's wooden house, now inhabited by his father and godfather.

Small billows of smoke emanated from the top of the hut, swirling playfully until they were whipped away by the wind. The dark wooden planks absorbed the small light cast upon them; viscous smudges scattered around and twisted, odd rusty nails poked out of them. The parquetry on the threshold was mouldy, looking as if it would collapse if someone stood on it.

He skidded to a halt when the door flung open and to reveal a slightly dishevelled Michael. His school robes were somewhat lopsided and, surprisingly for a Potter – tattered. His shirt was rumpled, and he was loosening his green-and-silver tie in an annoyed manner. With a swift kick, he closed the door and huffed, tossing the tie away and then ruffling his hair, muttering something under his breath.

He jumped from the entrance steps and landed dexterously on the grass, his knees bent and with one hand lightly touching the soil below his feet. With an undignified huff, he slumped down on the grass and crossed his legs, his upper body resting on his bent forearms.

Harry stared at him, his eyes alight with curiosity. He tottered down to him, and yet kept a safe distance, careful not to make any sound. He observed Michael keenly. He had the look of someone who was incredibly tired and frustrated. By the bags under his eyes and the strain etched on his face, Harry could guess that life was taking a toll on him. Unlike him at his age, Michael didn't seem to be underfed, yet the lean lines across his chest and abdomen told him that, if Michael were to meet Mrs Weasley, she would immediately start shoving food down his throat.

A twig snapped under his feet. Harry swore when Michael whipped his head around to stare at the precise spot where he was standing, his wand drawn and at the ready.

‘Who’s there?’ he demanded authoritatively.

Harry sighed and took the Invisibility Cloak off. ‘It’s me, Gryffindor.’

Michael’s demeanour relaxed instantly at the sight of the hooded Harry and lowered his wand. Smiling feebly, he patted the ground next to him, motioning Harry to sit down by his side.

Harry obliged, excited at the prospect of talking to – to his brother, yet pleased to know that his disguise was still in place. Getting rid of the wave of uneasiness that cascaded over him, he crossed his feet and bent his knees, lowering his body to the ground.

Dumbledore and Neville were right. He had to let go of his apprehension and be with his family. Even if he wasn't ready yet to let go of his hood, he would make an effort to know them better and stop running away. He was supposed to be a Gryffindor, wasn't he?

‘How is school?’ Harry asked tentatively.

Michael snorted derisively. ‘The usual bunch of rubbish. Being a Half-blood surrounded by inbred prats isn't as easy as it sounds,’ he said venomously, his hazel eyes hard and blazing.

Harry arched an eyebrow under his hood. ‘I imagine it can't be easy.’

Michael shook his head. ‘It's pandemonium. People like myself – the lowly Half-bloods – we don't even have a standard education. We don't have classes such as “Charms”, “Transfiguration”, etc. No,’ he spat, his face twisted in an ugly scowl, ‘we get the abridged version for dim-witted trolls: we only learn enough spells so that when we graduate, us Half-bloods will only know how to cook, clean and so on.’ His hands were fisted in anger. ‘We are turned into servants the moment we set foot in that school,’ he snarled.

Harry frowned in thought. He hadn't known that Half-bloods were being treated as sub-humans. Or at least, not to that extent. ‘So which are your subjects at school?’ he inquired, a tendril of worry nagging him at the back of his mind.

His brother picked up a stone from the ground and flung it with all the strength he had. Not even turning his head to face him, he answered,

‘Charms for Households, Transfiguration Made Easy, Useful Everyday Potions, Care of Domestic Magical Creatures, Simple Herbology and Career Choosing.’

‘They are seriously called that? But it sounds like a magazine or something,’ he verbalised, puzzled.

Michael gave him a small smile. ‘Yeah, I know.’

‘What’s “Career Choosing”?’

The younger boy gave him a funny look. ‘It’s a subject that trains us to be cleaners, waiters... Depending on which area we are most proficient in, we get ticketed to get a job in that field. Doesn’t matter what we want to be, we have no choice,’ he finished quietly, an odd look on his face as he stared at the lake ahead.

He stared quietly at his brother’s morose form, spikes of anger stabbing him. What Voldemort was doing was a crime, one that would not go unpunished. He wouldn’t get away with it – especially when it was hurting people he cared about. He was slaughtering dreams and hopes of the new generations, and that was something that could never be forgiven.

All uneasiness forgotten, he grabbed his brother’s arm by the elbow and made him turn to face him.

He ignored the surprised expression on his sibling’s face; he was too consumed in his own wrath. ‘I swear, Michael, that no matter how long it takes,’ he whispered, seething, his green eyes alight with fury, ‘Voldemort will bleed for this.’

Michael stared back at him silently for a few minutes, his eyes piercing through him, as if he were searching for something deep

within Harry. The soft winds created phantom fingers that ran freely thorough Michael's hair, making it even more tousled, giving him an air of wonderment and intrigue.

Seemingly satisfied with what he had found, his lips broke into a tiny smile. 'Thanks, Gryffindor.'

He released his brother's arm and put it in his lap, still fuming.

He took a deep breath, pushing his lungs to near explosion, trying to calm himself. Bit by bit, the sharp nails of anger receded and crawled out of him, until he was left shaken but tranquil.

Like a beacon, a sudden thought shone brightly in his mind. 'You don't have Defence Against the Dark Arts?' he enquired.

Michael snorted sardonically. 'What for? We are filthy Half-bloods. So we get killed – big deal.' He scratched the back of his hand furiously, his nails digging deep into the skin. 'Killing a Half-blood isn't a crime punishable by law, so why would we need to learn Defence? What's the use of us learning how to keep ourselves alive if by doing so we would deprive the Purebloods of their high and noble Half-blood Hunting sport?' he demanded scornfully, his lips twisted in a vicious curl. 'We are their bloody dummies for Dark Arts practise. I don't know how many times I have been hit with a Cruciatus coming from another zealous student.'

Silence fell upon them. Harry considered that was a good thing, because he was in the middle of quenching his urge to storm through the castle and curse all of the Death Eaters and their children until their brains turned into mush. How dare they? How bloody dare they -?

'Demelza Robbins,' he said randomly, his pupils dilating, snapping Harry out of his dark line of thought. 'Demelza was a Half-blood and

a friend in that viper's nest,' he clenched his fists, his knuckles white. 'She was my girlfriend in fifth year and used to stare longingly at the Quidditch pitch, wishing she was allowed to fly.' He tore a bunch of grass from the ground, his shoulders squared in anger.

He turned his head so fast to Harry he might have got a whiplash. 'Last year, she was caught one night sneaking out for a ride on a broom. A bunch of Pureblood third years saw her and instead of taking her back to the castle or even ratting her out, what did they do? They practised what they had learnt in the Dark Arts class.'

Harry had no idea where the story was going, but he listened avidly. It seemed that that particular story was a thorn dug deep into his brother's heart, something that had made him snap.

Michael sneered. 'They cast the Killing Curse on her. Because she wanted to fly.'

Harry's mouth was open in a silent scream of horror. 'What?'

His younger sibling paid him no heed. 'And what did those bastards get? Expulsion? No. Suspension? No. Detention? No,' his lips curled upwards in pure loathing, 'they got a bloody award for being successful at performing an impeccable Avada Kedavra at the age of thirteen.'

Harry was horror-struck, he turned sheet-white, his insides turning cold. In which world were barely pubescent teenagers rewarded for murdering another student?

A nastily vindictive smile appeared on Michael's lips. 'I got their names. As soon as I am of age, I'm going to shred those wankers to dust.'

A flash of rancorous madness took over his eyes, giving him the haunted and dangerous look of a murderer who had been deprived

of his monthly dose of bloodbath. For a fleeting instant, he thought he was seeing himself when he ran after Bellatrix after Sirius had been sent through the Veil. His mind had been swimming in a sea of hatred, with waves of insanity rising and curling, ready to strike, white-hot anger as their crest. He had needed to lash out at the bloody wench who had taken Sirius away from him.

But that illusion evaporated faster than Harry could have thought possible. His previous construction of Michael's character, like a pretty mosaic of delicate and colourful glass, shattered into a million pieces before his eyes.

Michael was bitter and vindictive. The image of a happy adolescent boy he had built in his mind evanesced. Inside the Chamber of Secrets, he had portrayed himself as a carefree kid with a great sense of adventure and mischief – meeting his expectations to the dot. He had spent his childhood with three of the Marauders, he had believed that with a solid background, he would rise to be someone free of the tarnishes Harry carried. It then dawned on him just how wrong he had been.

From the hard, thunderous expression in his eyes, to the nasty sneer that lingered on his lips and with a nose crinkled in distaste in between, Harry could see that acrimony and yearning for retaliation had ensnared his brother's mind. The boy he could have been was a mere façade that had resurfaced when he had met him – the person he was now thirsted for revenge and bloodshed.

In Harry's opinion, that was a crime.

‘One wise man once said,’ Harry interjected inaudibly, ‘that killing is not nearly as easy as the innocent believe.’

Michael's nostrils flared and his eyes flashed dangerously. ‘You – of

all people – I thought you would understand,’ he snarled lividly. He jumped to his feet and spat on the ground, furious, before he turned back to Harry, a sneer fixed on his face. ‘You are just as bad as them - another bleeding hypocrite!’

Harry stared at him, aghast. ‘Michael -’

He waved a dismissive hand in contempt. ‘Spare me the lecture, please. I’m not interested in your two-faced morals.’ He summoned his tie and stuffed it in his pocket. ‘The day you grow a backbone and stop echoing other people’s beliefs I’ll hear you out -’

Harry stood up angrily. ‘The hell is wrong with you? Stop acting like a bloody pampered brat -’

Michael shook in anger, his fists tightly clenched. ‘A pampered brat, you say?’ he asked venomously. ‘You have no idea what I have been through – don’t you dare think that you do!’

He laughed mirthlessly at that, a sound that would make even the toughest and most heartless of killers wince. He was Harry effing Potter, the Boy Who Survived To See Everyone Else Die. ‘Oh yeah? Then please do tell me your unbelievably tragic story,’ he spat scathingly, venom dripping from his voice.

Michael lunged at him, grabbed the front of his robes and shoved him backwards, forcing Harry to take a step back to keep his balance. ‘My mother and godfather were forced to flee because if they stayed they would be murdered! My father and Uncle Sirius are both a pair of spineless, pitiful drunkards of whom I am ashamed! I’m a laughing stock at school and a training dummy because I am a sodding Half-blood!’ he ranted furiously.

Harry raised an eyebrow under his hood. ‘Oh, is that all?’ he taunted in a fake nonchalant tone. ‘And here I thought you may actually prove

me wrong. You are still a spoiled brat to me!' he yelled.

Michael sputtered incoherently, his face deathly white. Suddenly, his demeanour did a one hundred and eighty spin and he stopped shaking. His features adopted a frosty air. For one moment, Harry couldn't see the striking resemblance he shared with his brother; instead, he saw Tom Riddle's derisive smirk.

'You have some nerve to speak to me like that, Gryffindor,' he mocked, cocking his head to the right haughtily, crossing his arms tightly over his chest. 'You come here out of nowhere, regaling us with heartbreaking tales. You want us to trust you – but you give nothing back in return.'

Harry was seething. 'Acting like a stupid tosser is not the way to make me trust you,' he retorted, unwittingly mimicking his brother's pose. 'And what about that grand monologue you gave me in the Chamber? Acting all warm and accepting, as if yearning for my friendship, like a helpless puppy?'

Michael leered jeeringly at him. 'You seriously believed that?' he scoffed. His eyes raked his form insultingly. 'I can see that you are a Gryffindor through and through.'

He chuckled hollowly, his arms dropping to frame his sides. 'You are just as rash and foolhardy as my father and uncle. I acted like that because I wanted to wheedle out information of you, you stupid nitwit,' he ridiculed, his lips curling upwards in vindictive pleasure. 'Do you really believe that I could open up to a hooded stranger who chooses to waltz in whenever he fancies?'

He took a step forward, his face never surrendering that depreciating look. 'Do you seriously think that I would sit like a faithful puppy and not question your motives or your identity?'

Harry stared at him, gobsmacked; anger, disappointment and frustration seared through him. 'Who the hell -?'

Michael knotted his tie around his neck, his leer never wavering. He shoved his hands in his pockets, still managing to look high-and-mighty. 'I'm a Slytherin, you fool.'

Harry felt as if he had been slapped across the face; and for a moment, he was left cold and blank. His insides churned and clenched before wrath took over him. A fleck of anger sprung from the pit of his stomach, growing quickly and reaching every particle of his being, made his entire body and the ground beneath him shake.

Michael's derisive expression was whipped off his face, substituted by a blanket of fear. He immediately dropped his stance and took a step backwards, his hand clutching his wand in a vice-grip, his other hand and arm suspended in mid-air, as if to protect himself from Harry.

Harry roared and flung his arm backwards, his hand open in a clawing gesture. A red puff of magic sprouted from his hand and grew to the size of a beachball before Harry did a jabbing motion and sent it towards the Whomping Willow. Embers fell from the small sun, scorching the grass, before it collided with the old tree with a reverberating bang.

Without pausing a second to think about the consequences, he called forth the phoenix inside him and vanished in a mist of flames.

The old and treacherous Whomping Willow was blown to ashes that night. The following morning, a very haggard-looking and hung-over Sirius would face the wrath of Headmaster Rowle for his carelessness.

That night, Michael trudged up to the castle silently, consumed by his thoughts. He never spoke a word about his fight with Gryffindor.

But more importantly, on that crisp and cold January night, many miles away, Lord Voldemort frowned.

-oOoOoOoOo-

Five members of the Weasley family stood stunned in the living room, not quite grasping what had occurred in it and completely horrified by what had happened. The current guest the Burrow held, however, was as cool and collected as you please, glancing calmly at the Weasley Family Clock, not a speck of terror or distress in her pale and dreamy eyes.

Only the melodious chimes of the wizened grandfather clock could be heard as it struck the hour. If one strained their ears, they could even catch the mellifluous ticking whispers of the iron hands.

The air of the Burrow was choked with the stale scent of sweat, desolation palpable in the air. The couch was stained with black soot and reeked of death, bitter and macabre. Firewood crackled in the grate, yielding hopelessly to the flames that licked them ablaze along their length. Echoes of terror reverberated along the dusty walls, leaving a pungent air of misery inside the room.

The first to break the rancid silence was a short, plump woman with a kind face and hair as red as her children's. She seemed to dwindle in a matter of seconds, sagging and clinging onto the balding man next to her, whose face was grim and downcast. Her wails and cries of angst resonated throughout the room, so deep, so profound, and soul-wrenching the pillars of the ramshackle home awoke to mourn with her.

The eldest son felt his knees buckle and collapsed on a chair. His visage was lined with scars and wounds from past horrors. His hands lay trembling in his thin knees while his shoulders slumped. His long red hair was still waving, along with a fearsome fang that dangled

from his ear. His lips were a faint line while his eyes were wide open, trying to hunt the explanation that eluded his mind.

The only daughter in the family stood rooted to her spot. Her garments clung to her, soaked and dirty from her duels. Her hair was tied in a ponytail, strands of the darkest of reds escaping from it. The voracious flames in the chimney shed a shimmering light on her locks, making them look alive. Her face was so pale the freckles on the bridge of her nose stood out abominably, turning her usual charming good looks into hag-like features. Her dark shorts hugged her thighs tightly, and below them, terse and taut ashen legs held her weight as best as they could. Her wand was clamped firmly in her small hand, holding it at an awkward angle. Her expression could pass off as guarded and closed, but if one peered intently at her dark brown eyes, it would be blatant that she was about to break.

The tallest member of the family and youngest son had crumpled to the floor, haunted, broken, and powerless. He had the look of a man who had had everything in life only to see it be taken in a flash. His arms were crooked over the edge of the couch, his knees bent in a supplicating manner. His fingers twitched over the velvety and sooty beige surface of the couch, while he whimpered almost inaudibly. A look of sheer disbelief and despair was carved into his features.

The visitor clucked her tongue almost impatiently. Plucking her wand from her robes, she used it to shape her dirty-blond hair into a bizarre bun, her radish earrings swaying gently as she did so. Her pose was unnaturally relaxed and her faraway eyes were set on what was probably the most valuable heirloom the Weasleys had. Her gaze was firmly set on the ninth and tenth pointers of the grandfather clock. Ignoring the somersaults in her stomach, she smiled wistfully.

It was time.

‘She’s with Harry.’

-oOoOoOoOo-

Thin clouds lay scattered over the dark skies, grumbling with a soft tremor like war-drums. They approached each other tentatively, like new lovers would; grunting in satisfaction when they contacted, their cries resounding and echoing down to the still earth below. They danced cautiously, hesitant to move lest they were torn apart. They rejoiced with each star they covered, as if making it their duty to extinguish all the lights from the firmament.

Suddenly, to the east, the horizon erupted with light. Glorious, crimson, aching pure light trashed the darkness that enveloped the English soil. Night recoiled in fear at the unstoppable might of sunrise, and retreated to haunt the shadows and dark corners like a defeated enemy; licking and healing its wounds, waiting for the right moment to overpower the triumphant light.

The earth trilled in the newfound warmth, reflecting its gratefulness by producing pretty sights. Birds chirped graciously in their nests and trees sang gravely, their roots awakening from slumber with a low rumble. From deep harbour in Falmouth to the virginal lands of Loch Wabister, from the majestic and statuesque buildings in London to the rustic homes in A' Ghàidhealtachdt in Scotland, the manmade constructions shone proudly to welcome the new day.

The city of Dùn Èideann, more commonly known as Edinburgh, shook off the remnants of the night with a healthy growl, as the early risers that inhabited the metropolis exited their homes and got lost in the wynds of the Old Town. The New Town twittered with the customary hustle and bustle of an end-of-the-twentieth century conurbation.

But on the outskirts of the city, well away from the buzz of the municipality, hidden by physical and metaphysical obstacles, a house of wood and stone stood. Inside it, our dashing and foolhardy hero

was dozing off with his head on a wad of parchments.

The room was lit with an ethereal glow, the flames that provided it flickering slightly with the lightest of airs. It was impeccably clean, no doubt work of the willingly slave-driven Kreacher, and yet, it was also messy, the by-product of belonging to an adolescent boy.

Shelves upon shelves concealed the impossibly white walls, stacked with tomes; some of which appeared to have never been touched. The odd object adorned them, but they were mostly bare of embellishments, the owner of the house preferring to keep them practical instead of aesthetically pleasing. One might say that the entire house lacked a woman's touch, but in the mind of Harry Potter, such things as decoration mattered very little. He did care about the lack of a certain redheaded girl, but house enrichments were as far from his mind as could be.

An oblong, oaken rolltop desk was placed on top of a plain Prussian blue hearthrug. The corners of the table were protected by golden pieces of metal at its corners. The surface was screened with heaps of sprawled scrolls and quills, several lit candles hanging precariously around them as drops of wax smudged the parchments. It looked as if a hyperactive toddler had been unleashed upon the poor bits of paper, splattering ink on them, giving the desk a chaotic air.

Harry's head rested peacefully upon a spread scroll. Under him, his untidy scrawl was scribbled on the parchment, and if one tried their best to decipher the doodles, words such as "Nagini", "Fake Bellatrix?!?!", "Hideout", "Snape?" or even "WHO THE BLEEDING HELL IS ARTEMIS?!?!". Far more legible documents lay about his tousled hair, and one of them looked suspiciously like blueprints from some highly magical and inhumanly protected building.

A rudimentary myrtle quill was flattened against his hand, the tip of it etching dangerously towards his nostril. A wisp of his hair was dipped

into an ink bottle. His glasses were askew and his mouth slightly open, soft hums coming out of it from time to time, the product of pleasant dreams. The rusty light that filtered over his features made him look younger and more relaxed than ever, like a boy who had fallen asleep after having spent too much time on a playground.

He seemed so unusually carefree that when another person entered the room, he stopped in his tracks and appeared reluctant to wake him up.

Neville Longbottom was beyond exhausted. He had spent the whole night testing his plants and it showed in his appearance. There were deep gashes in his skin, and his robes were torn and soiled, as if he had decided to roll in something muddy. His hands were holding a pot that contained his wand and a purplish plant. It had a long, woody stem, and it sprouted many violet, vicious-looking talking flowers. The blossoms Through their sharp teeth, the blossoms snarled colourful expletives that any mother would cringe to overhear. His normally neat, sepia brown hair was spattered with leaves and gooey lime-green stuff. Below the bags under his eyes, his cheeks were dirty with dark blotches.

‘Harry,’ he whispered tremulously.

Harry snored.

‘Harry,’ he verbalised, louder this time.

Harry twitched but kept sleeping.

‘Harry!’ Neville insisted, prodding him with a finger.

‘Gee-knee... tha’s m’ broom you’re playing wiz, m’ Fyeboll,’ he

slurred, crinkling his nose.

Neville sniggered at the double-entendre, covering his mouth with his hand. Who knew that Harry Potter was capable of such amusing dreams, instead of the predictable gory and lurid nightmares?

‘Kehfull, I polish the handle ev’ry nigh’, yeah’ he muttered, giving a loud snore afterwards. ‘Y’ can polish i’ too.’

Neville guffawed heartily. If the Headmaster hadn’t been so adamant about fetching Harry, he would have kept listening to him talking in his sleep. Harry was seldom this entertaining, what with a madman after his blood and all that psychotic stuff.

He placed the naughty-worded plant on the desk, careful not to put it on the sprayed ink. He drew his wand from the wet earth and held it in his hand, still grinning at Harry. He placed his hand on Harry’s shoulder and shook it, calling his name, his voice a bit louder.

‘Harry! Harry! HARRY!’ Still no response. Nevilled harrumphed, enough was enough. Adopting a pensive expression, he went through his repertoire of harmless spells inwardly and decided to use a Stinging Hex. ‘Morsus!’

Harry yelped, waking up with a start and, predictably, a quill went up his nose. ‘Ouch!’ he barked, tossing the offending barb onto the floor. ‘What the hell was that for?’ he glared at Neville, rubbing his nose fitfully.

Neville grinned as he pocketed his wand, unfazed. Picking up his potty-mouthed plant, he told Harry, ‘I have been trying to wake you up for the past ten minutes. Even when I was yelling at you, you kept snoring and talking in your sleep -’ to his amusement, Harry flushed red at that and set his glasses straight in a dignified manner, as if

daring him to utter a word. 'So anyway, I used a Stinging Hex. Sorry about the quill,' he winced.

Harry rubbed his eyes and waved a hand dismissively, as if telling him that it was all right. He rose to his feet and stretched his legs, covering a yawn with his hand. 'So what's up, mate?' he asked, running his fingers through his bedraggled hair. He peered closer at him and frowned. 'And why do you look like death had warmed over?'

'Dumbledore asked for you. Dunno, some lesson or something.' He shrugged his shoulders noncommittally. 'As for my haggard appearance,' he sighed, scratching his chin and glaring fleetingly at the impertinent plant ('Oy, stupid boy! Put me down this bleeding instant or I'll rip your -'). 'I have been up all night.'

Harry raised his eyebrows.

Neville crackled his neck uncomfortably. 'I – well, I just – dunno. Had lots of work.' His eyes were downcast, irrational embarrassment filling him, retreating into his former shy self at Harry's piercing gaze. He suddenly felt smaller and younger, just as scared as he had been in Potions' class. 'I am just playing to my strengths, I guess. I'll never be an incredible dueller, but I can help in this war with my talent,' he said, almost defensively.

Harry smiled kindly at him. 'It's all right, mate.' He placed a placating hand on his shoulder. 'I understand.' He removed the weight from his shoulder and bent slightly, placing both hands on his knees, gazing curiously at the brazen plant. 'So what is this?'

Neville's insecure mien dissipated and was replaced by a frustrated scowl. 'This blasted thing was supposed to be able to fire Impedimenta curses -'

Harry straightened up as if electrified. His eyes were wide, the green in his orbs shining brightly. 'You – can make plants,' by this point, he was hissing and sounding oddly threatening, staring at him so avidly it looked as if he was going to eat him. Harry looked again at the pot in his arms. 'You can make plants - plants! - fire curses?'

Neville seemed to shrink before him, as if he were facing Professor Snape in one of his rages instead of a friend. His head was hanging down shamefully and pitifully. Harry caught up with that fact rather quickly and grinned maniacally at Neville.

'Mate, this is wicked!' he proclaimed. Neville raised his head, surprised, and Harry beamed at him, elated. 'Seriously, this is bloody brilliant! You are brilliant! I doubt anyone in England has this kind of talent!' he gesticulated wildly with his hands, excitement leaking from his voice. 'Death Eaters won't stand a chance against you if you pull these tricks on them!'

'Th-thanks, Harry,' Neville stammered bashfully, yet immensely pleased.

Harry grinned even wider. 'Listen, I have to go see what Dumbledore wants, but seriously mate, congratulations! Keep it up!' He said, bubbling with enthusiasm as he picked up a couple of scrolls and straightened out his robes.

He walked towards the door and pulled it open, but before he exited the room, he turned around and smiled benignly at Neville, who was still holding his plant and looking very awkward. 'Neville,' he said softly, 'your parents were excellent Aurors, but with your talent, you will outshine them. Your parents would be very proud of you.'

Harry left the room leaving a flustered boy inside. Neville was smiling so brightly it looked as if a small sun had located itself in Harry's

office.

-oOoOoOoOo-

Five heads turned sharply to the owner of that voice, ten eyes piercing through her. But Luna Lovegood remained unflappable, as if she hadn't even noticed it.

‘What do you mean, “she is with Harry”?’ a voice said harshly from the floor. Luna noted it belonged to Ronald Weasley. But he wasn't looking like Ronald at all. She noticed that his eyes were glazed, giving him a very funny look. Oh, that's right. He had been possessed by Wrackspurts - again. Pity, Ronald could be very funny when he wanted to. Now that the Wrackspurts had taken over him, he wouldn't make her laugh anymore. Shame.

Ronald got up and walked towards her. Luna could guess that he was angry, but why? She had no idea. It was probably the Wrackspurts. How odd.

‘Luna, answer me! What do you mean she is with Harry?’ he bellowed, placing his hands on her shoulders and shaking her.

Oh, that is nice; the Wuckiepoots inside me are happy, she thought delightedly. She let Ronald continue with his attentions for some time, until she realised that the gleam in his eyes was starting to look very deranged. The Wrackspurts had clearly affected him. Poor Ronald, he couldn't help it, just as Harry Potter was unable to resist the influence of Moonmoodies.

Oh, this is bad, she thought, the Wrackspurts will melt Ronald's brains at this rate. I suppose I had better talk to him. I think the Wrackpurts used his body to ask something, but what was it?

‘Luna, before Ron breaks your scapulae, can you please answer how on earth is it that you know that she is with Harry?’ Ginny asked; her shoulders tense and her face grim.

Oh, Ginevra. She liked her. Honest and straight to the point. She raised her eyebrows, though. She couldn’t really understand why people didn’t pay attention to their dreams. They were a true source of information.

‘It was her time. Hermione Granger is in perfect health. I don’t think her counterpart is, though,’ she winced, almost apologetically. Almost.

‘BUT HOW DO YOU KNOW THAT?’ Ron hollered, spit flying everywhere.

Luna remained as unflappable as ever. She gave him a small smile and glanced at the Weasley Family Clock. ‘Look at Hermione’s pointer, Ronald. If she had died, the hand would have fallen off. Instead, it says she is travelling.’

Cling.

The pointer moved to “Mortal Peril” again.

Ronald’s knees buckled over and he fell on the couch. ‘She is with Harry.’

-oOoOoOoOo-

Harry trekked down the stairs, feeling elated at Neville’s prowess. All in all, he was beyond astonished at his friend’s proficiency in Herbology. The fact that Neville was creating weapons out of plants –

plants! – was something incredibly original and would sure be unexpected by Lord Voldemort's army. Harry grinned wickedly as he jumped down onto the first floor; Voldemort won't know what will hit him, he thought.

Despite his exultation at his friend's unparalleled skills, there was, deep within him, a lingering sensation of anger and disappointment. At first, he couldn't place it; but then the heated argument that had happened between him and his brother the previous night came back to him with force. Glowering, he walked towards the living room, where the Headmaster was waiting for him.

The house was eerily quiet, only the soft falling of light raindrops outside could be heard. From time to time, a low curse from upstairs reached Harry's ears, no doubt coming from a frustrated Neville. Dawn was creeping through the windows, sneaking its way stealthily towards him. Harry wondered briefly when had he come to accept waking up at ungodly hours as normal. Smiling nostalgically, he remembered that a few years back, he would have only got up this early if the Quidditch-maniac Oliver Wood dragged him out of bed. Those were the days, he thought wistfully.

His mind went back to his brother almost instantaneously, making him glower once again. He didn't even acknowledge his professor when he sat down in front of him in the kitchen. The Headmaster greeted him as warmly as usual, but his thoughts were elsewhere; far, far away from the Headmaster, the kitchen, the table between them and his words.

He just couldn't help it. All his life, Harry Potter had been an orphan, deprived of all the good things that involved having a family. He had spent his first eleven years sharing a dark cupboard with spiders, unwanted and unloved by his only living relatives. Then he had gone to Hogwarts – and he couldn't even have dreamed of the joys he found there. Granted, his schooldays were plagued by threats on his life and unsung and costly adventures, but the fact remained that

Hogwarts had been his true home. But now he was in this forsaken world, and he had a family – Harry Orphan Potter had a family, for Merlin's sake! – and it had disappointed him, or at least his brother had. He couldn't –

‘Harry, my good man, there is a time and a place for morose, dark thoughts, but neither involve family,’ Professor Dumbledore interjected, bringing him out of his reverie. ‘It does not do to dwell on grudges and forget to cherish what you have.’

Harry stared at the Headmaster long and hard. ‘I'm fine, sir,’ he replied, in a true Harry-fashion.

The Headmaster chuckled lightly, trimming his beard. ‘Ah, Harry. As astounding as your progress is, I am afraid that you are not as of yet proficient enough in Occlumency so as to be able to claim that you are able to lie to me successfully,’ he said good-naturedly.

Harry had the decency to blush. ‘Sorry, sir.’

‘That is quite all right, my dear boy, quite all right. When one's life is as troubled as yours, an old meddlesome coot such as myself cannot expect the youth to be as forthcoming as they should.’ Dumbledore grabbed his long silvery beard and swung it over his shoulder, as if it were a scarf, and then proceeded to sip on his tea, a pensive expression on his face.

‘Sir, er, Neville said that you wanted to talk to me?’ Harry asked tentatively while accepting a mug from Kreacher.

Dumbledore nodded gravely, placing his cup gently on the table. ‘Indeed, Harry, indeed. I delayed speaking with you yesterday night, for you were worn and distraught; but I cannot postpone the matter

any longer.' The twinkle disappeared from his eyes. He suddenly looked older and wearier than before; something which was in itself quite a feat, considering this Dumbledore had spent six years in Azkaban.

'Quite a display of magic last night, Harry.'

Harry's ears perked up at that, and he frowned. How on earth had Dumbledore heard of his outburst?

Dumbledore glanced at him shrewdly, his eyes narrowing slightly. 'Yes, I did feel your magical explosion. As a matter of fact, I dare say that half of England did.'

Harry blinked. 'What?'

The ancient professor acquiesced solemnly. 'Alas, Harry, it is the curse of the powerful wizard. Forever, the one who wields an enormous power must keep their actions in check; never wavering, never surrendering, lest they turn into something that belongs in the realm of nightmares.'

Harry just stared at Dumbledore as if he had grown an extra head.

Dumbledore chuckled merrily at Harry's bafflement, his eyes twinkling again for the briefest of seconds. 'Harry,' he said seriously, all previous amusement disappearing from his old, folded face. 'The fact remains that your eruption of magical power will not go unnoticed -'

Harry felt a lump in his throat. 'You think that – that Voldemort -?'

The Headmaster nodded austere. 'Indeed, I believe so, Harry. I'm convinced that he felt your surge of power, but has not as of yet deciphered that you were the caster. I do not think I need to impress

upon you the utmost importance of keeping you a secret,' he said sternly, but without any malice.

Harry agreed, dumbfounded. 'But – how?'

Dumbledore gave him a calculating look before he opened his mouth, as if evaluating him. 'We, witches and wizards, are all drawn to magic. The more prominent it is, the more we feel the pull towards it. We are attuned to magic, Harry. Dark Lords do not need impressive displays of magical ability to lure their followers, but they carry them out to keep them under a tight leash.

'Other immensely powerful warlocks – please forgive my utter lack of modesty – such as myself; we do not want to restrain others, but people will follow our lead simply because magic sings out from us.'

Harry stared at the Headmaster as if he had just declared his undying love for a Blast-Ended-Skrewt.

But Dumbledore wasn't joking. In fact, he looked dead serious. Silence reigned over the kitchen for a few minutes, in which only the faint drips coming from the sink could be heard. Slow, sad droplets of water fell from the iron mouth of the handle, screaming in despair when they crashed against the metallic surface of the basin, helplessly yielding to the black pipe that drained them.

Dumbledore sprang suddenly to his feet with an energy befitting an athlete, his garishly flamboyant robes bouncing as he did so. The expression on his face was just like when he had explained to Harry the difference between being dragged into the arena and facing the perils ahead, straight and proud.

'It is imperative, Harry, now more than ever, that you keep your emotions, and thus your magic, under control, for people will flock to

your side not out of loyalty, but out of thirst for power: crush their aspirations and delusions of grandeur, and they will betray you.'

Harry was dumbfounded. 'But sir, what does that have to do -?'

The Headmaster looked almost impatient. 'It has everything to do with Voldemort! Can you not see this, Harry?' there was almost a pleading note in his voice. 'I cannot allow you to make the same mistakes I did in my Order of the Phoenix days – and much less the errors I committed in my youth!'

'Sir, I'm not exactly sure I'm following you, I -'

Dumbledore slumped back in his chair, all of his previous agility and energy forgotten. He looked old, older and ghastlier than when Harry had come back from the graveyard after Voldemort's resurrection in his fourth year. The abundant lines on his face seemed somehow even more prominent than before, but instead of giving him a grandfatherly air, he resembled a long-bearded wraith.

'Harry, let me tell you a story,' he said, barely whispering. 'A long, long time ago, a wizard was born. He had virtually limitless amounts of magical power flowing within his veins and the mind of a genius. He lived a simple life with his family. He went to school and outshone the rest of his peers, but he never felt the urge to explore his untapped talents.'

Dumbledore had a glint in his eyes that revealed deep, soul-wrenching sadness. The ever-present annoying twinkle had been snuffed out of him. It was, perhaps, the one occasion where Harry saw the formidable warlock looking vulnerable. It was so odd Harry fidgeted uncomfortably.

'But then tragedy struck his family: his father was carted off to

Azkaban, his sister's magic and mind became erratic, and his mother died.' Harry didn't imagine the flare of pain that crossed Dumbledore's eyes just then.

'He sought refuge in his studies. He built a wall around himself and forgot about his unstable sister and wayward brother. He became – outstanding; a prodigy, hailed by his peers and professors. He believed his unmatched magical power made him better than the rest, he felt he was entitled to something more, something more wondrous than the mediocre life he lived.

'And so when another highly talented wizard came into the picture, he could have not been more elated. His arrogance had reached such heights that he considered the rest of the people in his life as mere second-rate beings, not worthy of anything. His new friend encouraged this belief, and together, they planned the dawn of a new era, with the two of them as the omniscient and omnipotent sovereigns of the Magical and Muggle Worlds.'

Harry knew, of course, that Dumbledore was talking about himself, and certainly knew better than to interrupt the Headmaster, even though he had no idea where this conversation was going. Still, a part of him was incredibly intrigued to hear this story first-hand, instead of all the rubbish Skeeter had published.

Dumbledore sighed and lowered his head, then removed his half-moon glasses, deftly pinching the bridge of his crooked nose. When he raised his gaze again, shame and sadness were etched upon his face.

'It took the death of his sister, perhaps by his own hand, to realise what a fool he had been,' he said, his voice so soft Harry thought he may have imagined it. He replaced his glasses and proceeded to

stare intently at Harry. 'Dreams come and go, Harry. However, once the ones you love go, they can never come back.'

Harry nodded absent-mindedly, not having the faintest clue what to say. Perhaps his clueless face gave him away, because the Headmaster chuckled genially at him.

'Ah, I'm frightfully sorry, Harry. You have listened in rapt attention to the ramblings of an old coot without ever knowing why.'

Harry smiled sheepishly at him.

Dumbledore's face left his previous amusement and turned serious again. 'Harry, before the Hogwarts' battle, you were an outstanding wizard, but you were not in the league of Voldemort or myself. Had the events not followed the course they did, Voldemort would have already taken over your world and you, the prophesied one - you would have lost.

'But now you find yourself with more magical power than you ever believed possible. You have trained hard, but you cannot allow yourself – not for one second – to believe that you have complete control over it, that you are in charge. The magic in you is alive and wants to be used. You will feel the pull to produce impressive displays, to go where nobody has ever gone. In short, you will have the same illusions of grandeur I had, the same foolish aspirations Grindelwald concocted, the same megalomaniac dreams which swim around Tom's mind.'

Harry gasped, half in horror, half in anger. Was Dumbledore suggesting that he could become the next Dark Lord? After everything he had gone through?

The Headmaster seemed to have guessed his thoughts. 'No, Harry, I

do not imply that you and Tom are the same. You could never be the same. However, you are still human, gifted and flawed. I see it my duty to stress upon you that you must never lose sight.'

He inhaled deeply, his shoulders slouching a bit. 'I do not wish my fate upon you, my dear boy.'

And then, it dawned upon Harry. He understood.

'A very upsetting event must have occurred for you to have such an outburst; but that be as it may, you must control your temper and magic, or else someone you care about may be hurt. Just like Arianna was.'

Harry agreed silently. No matter how miffed he was at his brother, he should know better than that. He was no longer an average wizard. He was a ticking bomb. One tiny explosion and he could kill someone unwittingly. One step out of line, and he could lose sight. He scratched at his scar tiredly. Things were so much easier when he was younger.

'I'm sorry, sir,' he mumbled forlornly.

Dumbledore shook his head, his eyes twinkling again. 'There is no need to apologise, my good man. You did no wrong by me. However, I am afraid that you may have shaved a pair of years off the person you were angered at.'

Harry smiled weakly. 'Michael,' he croaked. 'It was my brother, Michael.' A spurt of irritation soared inside him, but he forced himself to get rid of it. 'He – he is not -'

The professor smiled kindly at him. 'He is not what you expected. The boy you met in the Chamber of Secrets was a mere charade; the

one you met yesterday was your real brother. You find yourself disappointed and betrayed.'

Harry moved his head up and down miserably, agreeing with him.

'Ah, Harry. I once knew young Michael. He was a happy and dear boy, but sadly, things have not evolved for him as well as they should have -'

'But, sir! I could never -'

'Yes, Harry. You would never. But what you have not yet realised is that there are few people in this world as special as you.'

He flushed scarlet and dropped his head, staring meekly at the floor.

'Give your brother another chance, or as many as he needs. Establish bonds with your father and godfather, do not hide anymore. Your family, your friends, Harry, are the most prized treasures you will ever know.'

He shuffled his feet uneasily, his eyes fixed on his shoelaces. He felt ashamed and uncomfortable. Dumbledore was right, and he should know better. He thought it was ironic that after having wanted to meet his family all of his life, now that he could, he choose to remain distant.

Oh, he would still hide under his hood, no doubt about that; but he would make a bigger effort to get to know them. Perhaps in the future he may reveal himself to them, but certainly not at the moment. It was too risky; they lived in the lion's den. If word got out that "Harry Potter" was alive and kicking, it would cause them a lot of trouble.

‘Speaking of family, Harry,’ Dumbledore interrupted, snapping him out of his reverie. ‘You must have wondered what became of your mother, Lily Potter.’

It wasn’t a question, so Harry simply assented silently. Yes, he had thought about it many a time, but had never said a word. It wouldn’t do him any good if he raised any suspicions.

‘Before I was incarcerated, fully aware that the situation could only worsen, I implored Lily and Remus to go into hiding. I could not bear the thought of such dear people being executed. After many arguments, your father, godfather and I succeeded in convincing them. Thus, a new Fidelius Charm was to be performed to keep them both safe.’

Harry paled. That piece of magic and his family just didn’t get along.

‘However, after the disastrous effects the last Fidelius had, I refused to allow anyone but myself to pick the Secret Keeper. In fact, I am the only one who knows who the Secret Keeper is. Cruel as it sounds, for your family’s sake, it was decided that they would not know about their locations or the identity of the Keeper.’

Harry furrowed his eyebrows. That was very cruel. His father, brother and godfather must have spent some horrible years; never knowing, always in the dark. No wonder James and Sirius drank so much. No wonder Michael was so bitter.

‘It is time for them to come out,’ he said simply.

Harry pressed his lips together. ‘Are you sure that’s a good idea?’

‘Alas, I will always have doubts. However, having weighed the options, I daresay it is the best move. The war will break out in earnest, and I promised Lily that whenever it did, I would call her to join us one last time.’

He wasn’t convinced. It would be better if they stayed low. If he could, we would send his father, brother and godfather into hiding too.

‘Who is the Secret Keeper?’ he asked suddenly, suspicion rising inside him.

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow. ‘Have you not deciphered it yet, Harry? Can you not think about the one -’

BOOM.

Dumbledore and Harry both sprung to their feet, their wands brandished and at the ready, waiting for an attack. At the same time, Neville ran down the stairs, covered in goo, but with a grim determination and a fighting stance in place.

It was Kreacher. The House-Elf held a wooden box in his hand and ran to him, a frantic look on his wizened face.

‘Kreacher! What’s wrong?’ Harry asked, lowering his wand and bending his knees to level himself with the elderly elf. Dumbledore and Neville mirrored his actions.

‘Master Harry! Master Harry! Kreacher thinks that the most noble and wise Master Harry must listen to this!’ he shouted, the box in his hands shaking, a buzzing noise coming from it.

Harry shot him a puzzled look. 'Er, what is that?'

'I believe that is a WWW portable radio, Harry,' Dumbledore quipped, his brows creased.

'Where did you get it?'

Kreacher shook his head hectically. 'Kreacher does not think that is not important, Master Harry, sir. Kreacher thinks glorious Master Harry is to listen,' he cried. He waved his bony hand around the box, and the soft buzz he had heard before turned into a distinctive, haughty, female voice.

His mind had frozen; it took him two minutes to grasp what he was hearing. He gasped and swore loudly. Hurriedly, he summoned his robes and grabbed Neville, both vanishing in a haze of flames.

'...Fifty dead Renegades, the attack was a major success... The corpses are being brought to the morgues... Renegade safehouse destroyed... Artemis...'

-oOoOoOoOo-

DISCLAIMER:

Lord Voldemort stormed through his private room, destroying and exploding things as he thundered across it. Lord Voldemort was miffed, he had just received terrible news.

He slumped on his bed and buried his head in his hands. His spidery fingers ran through his baby-bum-smooth bald head. Things couldn't get worse for Lord Voldemort.

The Dark Lord had been informed that apparently he was nothing but a fictional character, created by one JKR. He could deal with that. He was still an evil Dark Lord. But the news he had been given today, that he could not take.

Lord Voldemort walked to the nearest mirror and glanced at his reflection. JKR described him as a hybrid between a man and a snake. Something ghastly, something nobody would ever find attractive. That got Voldemort very upset. You see, Lord Voldemort sees himself as classy and sophisticated. The Dark Mark is the new rage, after all. People always get nose surgeries, so he is better off without one. He has pretty sparkling red eyes. Yet since he belongs to JKR, he is at her mercy and has to put up with the fact that she makes it sound as if he were the spawn of a Dementor who mated with a snowman.

Plus, that Vermouth girlie is always making fun of him. She even discusses the Dark Lord's physical relationships with her friends on Facebook. The shame! That Vermouth is in for a lot of Crucios. How dare she say those things? How dare she insinuate that Lord Voldemort is as pure as a unicorn? Ha! If she knew what Nagini can do...

Lord Voldemort was feeling down, his application to join the competition of "Miss Magical" had been turned down because he was ugly. Ugly!

Lord Voldemort sniffed. So he couldn't be Miss Magical – but he could still rule the world! And when he was supreme ruler of the universe, nobody would call him ugly, ha!

He smiled at his reflection, proud at himself. This moment needed an anthem.

Lord Voldemort opened his mouth. 'You are beautiful, no matter what

they say... Words can't bring you down...'

-oOoOoOoOo-

A/N: Yes, I had to split the chapter again. You don't know just how frustrating that is. Pffft. I seriously never knew that I could write so much for one of the plots in this story. Meh, I really want to jinx myself sometimes.

So now you know that ickle Hermy isn't dead. I mean, seriously, I just can't kill her because I want to, can I? Never been a fan of useless bloodbath; killing off characters just because I want to isn't my style. Plus, I like the character. So anyway, next chapter: you are in a heck of a ride. The scene I keep mentioning, it's definitely going to happen in chapter fifteen.

Please review?

By the way, I started a humorous fic, called "The Curse Life of Albus Severus Potter". It bothered me that considering the goofball I am in real life, I seemed unable to write funny stuff. If any of you are interested in complete and utter randomness, do check it out.

As usual, for any of you that might be interested, there's a link to my Yahoo! Group on my profile page, the address is:

[http://groups dot yahoo dot com forward slash group forward slash Vermouth underscore Fanfiction](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Vermouth_underscore_Fanfiction)

Until next time

Vermouth

Member of the Siriusan Order (why do I keep signing like this? I was fourteen when I joined that crazy group!!)

(REVISED: 13/07/09 – massive thanks to my incredibly talented beta Hasufel!)

IMPORTANT A/N: I warn you, this chapter is one of the reasons this story is rated as “mature”. The second half of it contains violence, some gore and character death. If this is not your cup of tea, perhaps you should skip it.

Also, I would like to apologise profusely for the awful delay, the insane length of the whale of a chapter below and the fact that since my beta is awfully busy at the moment, it would take her around a month or more to go over it. I did what I could, but I suck at catching my own mistakes.

Chapter Fifteen

The Man With Killing Eyes

The town of Lewes lay sprawled under the Southern British skies. The persimmon red light that emanated from the rising sun cast a melancholic glow which was muffled by the crying clouds that leaked a soft yet endless Scotch mist, moistening and dampening the spirits of the earth below. The green blades of the grass hunched in resignation, defeated, waiting for the drizzle to end. The manmade creations in the metropolis hissed as the faint drops lashed against their walls, whilst the reckless people who dared not to carry their umbrellas gave up and scurried away, seeking shelter.

Five miles away from the municipality, echoes of war and agony run through the damp and obscure forests. The Renegade house of Cherry Lane was sombre and dark, alive with death. The dwelling was shady and gave off the impression of being haunted by bloodthirsty spectres. It looked as if it had been abandoned centuries ago and was recently inhabited by careless beings. Austere arsenic grey planks of wood morphed themselves pitifully into the shape of a lacklustre trapeze. The smoky black quadrilateral windows rattled at the harsh cries from the inside that flogged them, again and again.

A man stood leaning against the north corner of the eerie abode,

reeking of calmness and indifference. His appearance was nondescript, hidden behind layers of magically-empowered clothes. He could have either been tall or squat, slim or plump. A hood draped his head, casting a shadow over his face, where only his mouth was visible and the phantom forms of his orbs were hinted at the dim ends of the illusion. His blue eyes were alight with pride and maliciousness as he rummaged into his pockets. He drew a packet of Muggle cigarettes and placed one between his thin, chapped lips, holding it tightly with his prominent and sharp teeth. He smirked lasciviously as he lit the cylinder with his chestnut wand, allowing himself to seek pleasure in that one unbefitting Muggle vice, the only memory that brought back his long forgotten father into his decayed and twisted life.

The cigarette flared with life and the man inhaled deeply, revelling in the soft, ensnaring corrosion that filled his already screechy lungs. A billow of smoke stemmed out of the corner of his lopsided mouth, threatening the already precarious position of the dangling cigarette. The rising fume soared into the air in an unremarkable puff and was rapidly disintegrated by the never ceasing beads of mizzle.

The man belonged in a portrait yet to be depicted; a ghostly, otherworldly silhouette, birthed from the blurry and furious paintbrush strokes of a bohemian artist.

He lifted his head to the heavens, relishing the wetness that caressed his skin, his cruel smile vanishing for the briefest of moments. He inhaled deeply, tugging at the end of the cigarette, relaxing as the seductive and lethal vapours filled him. He reached up and removed the cylinder from his lips, as he blew out a steam of condensed toxins from his pointed nose. It curled into the air languidly before it was whipped away by the rain.

The man tossed the cigarette to the ground, crushing it along with the remaining embers with his foot as he exhaled the last wisps of smoke from his chest. In a slow motion, he waved his wand silently about

his face, blurring and distorting his prominent features and reshaping the frame of them until he was a new man.

He set a mask of utter care and imbued his pale eyes with utmost affection and worry. He hid his nasty leer and replaced it with a grim line of concern.

Smirking inwardly, the wolf entered the sheepfold.

Rain fell down.

-oOoOoOoOo-

A fog of flames erupted as two figures landed clumsily thirty feet away from the Cherry Lane Renegade House, one of them managing to stay on his feet, the other falling to the ground in an undignified manner.

Harry helped Neville rise to his feet, offering a helping hand to pull him up. Neville winced as he lifted himself.

‘Are you all right?’ Harry asked, extracting his limb from his friend’s grasp.

Neville nodded. ‘Yeah. It’s just that I have a wound in my arm, and flaming didn’t help much with it. I guess it’s burnt now,’ he said, getting rid of the sap that still lingered on his face, remnant of his Herbology experiments.

Harry didn’t know that. ‘Sorry, mate.’

Neville shrugged. ‘Doesn’t matter. C’mon, let’s go.’

Without another word, they both pulled their hoods over their heads instinctively, their identities hidden once again behind Unspeakable

means. They straightened out their robes and, in Neville's case, tried to get rid of the patches of dirt and goo that were sprinkled all over them.

‘Wands out, do you reckon?’

Both weapons out, they slithered along the winding path that led to the house, trying to be as quiet as possible, treading softly and looking out for possible traps. They didn't know what they would find inside: would it be four walls stained with blood and gore or had this safehouse been spared? The dark susurrus whispered by the gloomy trees ahead didn't help them to tuck away their fears.

Harry hoped dearly that this particular house hadn't been attacked. He had never given it much thought before, but Owl had rapidly become a great friend of his own. There was much more to that girl than met the eye, and Harry appreciated it for what she was, a separate person from Hermione.

As they traipsed towards the house, nothing seemed out of place, but they still couldn't be sure. Harry turned his face to Neville and said, ‘get behind me and be at the ready.’

Neville shook his head. ‘No, you get behind me. You are too much valuable to lose.’

Harry refused point-blank to do so and stood by Neville's side, quickly casting a wandless Disillusionment Charm over them. Better safe than sorry.

They approached the entrance gingerly, standing at either side of the door. To the untrained eye, they were all but invisible, but Harry and Neville, who had a wide experience with Disillusionment Charm, could both catch the faint outlines of each other. That played into their advantage, because they were sending each other non-verbal

signals, shaped into dim contours of moving air and shadows.

Harry knew there was something off. The wards were down; there was no trace of magic in the door. He frowned and signalled Neville to stay still. He pressed his head to the wooden gate, straining his ears to catch the weakest of sounds.

Nothing.

Apprehension piled up in the pit of his stomach. The fact that no noise could be heard from the inside could only mean two things: one; there was a standard Silencing Charm and everyone was all right, or two; everything was quiet because there was nobody left alive.

His heart was beating madly inside his chest. Adrenaline was pumping through his system, as the pit in his stomach grew wider. He pondered which was the best course of action: kick the door down à la super-secret-agent-style or get inside quietly? Harry, being the Gryffindor he was, preferred to burst into the house, wands at the ready and fit for an attack; however, even though the –

Bang.

The door flung open and out came two hooded figures. Harry pressed himself against the door frame, wincing as he felt random nails piercing against his back. He hoped that Neville had done the same on the other side. Come to think about it, he hoped that the door hadn't hit Neville too harshly.

‘I'm off! Tell Dragon that I'll be going over to the house in Bristol, I need to check up on Keeper,’ one of the figures said, stomping on the ground in an edgy manner.

Harry narrowed his eyes, that voice was familiar. He couldn't place it,

but he knew he had heard that voice before. It was the voice of a man, a short and thin man, by the looks of it. He seemed nervous, for some reason.

The other figure walked confidently towards it and Harry released a sigh he didn't know he had been holding. He would recognise Owl's self-assured stride wherever he went.

‘Squeamish, Dragon said to stay put. You have to follow orders. It's not your place -’

Squeamish flung his arms over his head hysterically. ‘I don't care! My house was attacked! My house, my team!’ he cried frantically. ‘I can't stand it! I need to do something!’

Owl seemed to hesitate for a moment, her stern pose faltering. She raised her arm, as if to place a comforting hand on his shoulder, but then hesitated and dropped it. She let out a weary sigh and lowered her hood gently, a sympathetic expression on her very haggard-looking face.

‘I know, Squeamish. Nobody blames you, believe me. But it's protocol -’

Squeamish stomped his foot forcefully and gave a half-desperate, half-exasperated high-pitched yell. ‘I don't give a Knut about protocol now, Owl. I could care less about it!’ He punched the nearest tree, staggering backwards by the sheer strength he used, but not flinching in pain afterwards. ‘Can you not understand it? I lost most of my team -’

‘Which is why you should stay,’ he interrupted sternly. ‘Your team needs you, you are their leader -’

‘No, I cannot bear to be around so much pain and gore, I can’t -’

Owl lost her cool demeanour, her eyes flaring in anger. ‘Stop being so bloody selfish! They are seeking your reassurance! Be a man, be their captain!’

Squeamish shook his head stubbornly. ‘No. I will check on Keeper and then, when I have cooled down, I will come back. Inspect me, do whatever you want with me then. But not now, I need to cool off.’

Owl looked about to burst, but the barrage of words that she was about to utter died in her mouth, for Squeamish chose that instant to rearrange his robes and disappear with a faint ‘pop’.

Owl let out an irritated growl and balled her fists. Holding her arms closely to her sides and spun on her heel, turning her back on the house. Her back was hunched forwards and her stance was tense and rigid.

Harry dropped the Disillusionment Charm on him and Neville and started to walk up silently to Owl. Looking back, he would admit that it was not the best idea to creep up on her like that, because before he knew it, she had her wand pressing up on his pulse point in his neck, her eyes menacing and alert.

A second later, as she recognised him her gaze softened and she dropped her wand. ‘Don’t startle me like that.’

‘Sorry,’ Harry said sheepishly as he massaged his neck, while Neville chuckled lightly.

Owl sighed, defeated, and grabbed Harry by the crook of his elbow. ‘Come, we have to talk.’

She steered him towards the house, her face set in grim determination without revealing anything, while Neville trotted along behind them.

Owl skidded to a halt before they reached the entrance and released Harry's arm, putting one hand on his chest to stop his tracks. 'The wards have been modified. Hold on.' She drew out her wand and flicked it in a complicated pattern, muttering incantations under her breath, far too quietly and far too quickly for Harry to catch anything. Soon enough, a sliver of satisfaction crossed her face and Harry interpreted it as if they were good to go. 'All right, let's get inside.'

The door creaked open and Harry was forcefully reminded of the first time he had been there, when Luna had dragged him almost blindfolded. Some part of Harry was pleased to know that it remained as eerie and otherworldly as before, covered in an impenetrable darkness with some small, suspended in midair specks of green light.

The moment Owl closed the door behind them, a blur of sound and colour exploded. Harry shut his eyes tightly and winced at his sore eardrums. Bloody wards, he thought mutinously as he rubbed his ears and slowly adjusted his eyes to the new light.

It was just then that it all came to him. The reason they had come there in the first place. When Squeamish had stormed out of the house with Owl going after him, his curiosity had been piqued, as it always was. But now, he realised that this was not the highly dangerous adventures he was used to embark. He had come to know whether the Cherry Lane house was still a bastion of hope, or whether it had been turned into a tomb.

By the rush of sounds and images running past Harry, it was neither. The house had been turned into a hospital.

Neville seemed to share his thoughts. 'What the -?'

Owl shook her head. 'Not here. Let's go to Dragon's private quarters.'

The entrance corridor seemed to have been amplified. Instead of a narrow aisle, it was as large as the Hospital Wing, yet not remotely as immaculately clean. Rows upon rows of steely stretchers lay before his eyes, the legs glinting almost mockingly with smudges of caked blood. Morbidly, Harry realised that they were neither unused nor empty, but that the thin murky sheets that covered them hid lifeless bodies.

They passed the lines of corpses in silence. Owl was grim. Neville was trying very hard not to look at the bodies, his face ashen. Harry, on the other hand, presented a cool demeanour. On the surface, he seemed unflappable, but deep down, his insides were twisting in anger, desire for revenge and horror. For all he knew, under those covers, there might be someone he knew, someone who had fought alongside him, someone who had believed in him.

His heart skipped a beat when a gashed, female arm escaped the blanket and fell limply in front of him, droplets of crimson blood running along the forearm until they reached the thin fingers, where they lingered until, one by one, they plummeted to the floor.

'Quickly,' Owl said.

Neville schooled his features and Harry set his in grim determination. This war had to end.

Owl turned left and waved her wand once again. Turning to face them, she said, 'We are going straight for Dragon's room. I'll explain everything there. There have been some extra – developments you two could help us with.' Without another word, she leaned on the door behind her and pushed it open with her shoulder.

Inside, Dragon was waiting for them. He was sitting behind an old and scraped table. Beneath the wooden plank, his legs were open wide; above it, Dragon's head was buried inside the crook of his elbows, his fingers tugging at the end of his unkempt hair. Next to him, a half empty bottle of whisky hung precariously on the edge of the table. Clothes lay scattered around the small and humble bed in the background, shadowed by the faint light of the greenish torches nailed to the walls.

‘Dragon?’ Owl asked tentatively.

Dragon raised his head. Harry nearly gasped out loud. Dragon looked like death had warmed up. His eyes were glassy and, for a moment, confused. The bags under his eyes were prominent and dark. His freckles stood out like sickly blemishes and his skin was waxy and pasty. Harry was pleased to see that he didn't look wounded at all, but the man before him looked nothing like the Charlie Weasley he had known. He looked old and weary, as if he had gone through the horrors of dozens of wars.

“Lo’ he croaked, waving a hand sadly.

Owl, Neville and Harry pulled up three chairs and sat down, lowering their hoods. Harry crossed his arms and placed them on the table, leaning slightly forwards. They waited.

‘I failed them,’ he whispered, his gaze downcast.

‘No, you did not,’ Owl growled, placing her hands on top of Dragon's. ‘You did your best, you protected them for years. You -’

‘It doesn’t matter!’ he yelled, his eyes flashing with anger. ‘Can’t you see? I’m their leader! I was sworn -’

Owl’s nostrils flared. ‘You have more than fulfilled your oath to them, Dragon. You are the leader of the Renegades as a whole, but their leader is Squeamish, do not place this on your shoulders!’

Dragon pushed away Owl’s hands. ‘What are you trying to say? That they mean nothing? They were fifty Renegades, fifty of my own -’

Owl shook her head vigorously. ‘I’m not saying that. I’m horrified by what happened – but it is not your fault! They were protected by countless wards and the Fidelius!’

‘And look what good it did to them. Five escaped, Owl, five.’

She inhaled deeply and remained silent for a few moments, her face set in a dour expression. ‘And you are here for those who survived. You mourn the dead as if they were your own children. You will seek to protect the Renegades better than before.’

‘Grieve, cry, scream, remember – but do not forget the living. We are still here.’

At first, Harry thought that Owl was being incredibly harsh with her words. He could relate to Dragon, he knew what it was to be looked up as a leader and find yourself lacking. He knew what the survivor’s guilt felt like; he knew how costly his mistakes could be.

But it seemed that Owl knew Dragon best. The difference was not too huge, but Dragon’s shoulders weren’t as hunched as before, and his eyes were not as glassy and void. Harry was no expert in this field, but if he didn’t know better, he would say that there was

something between Dragon and Owl.

‘What happened?’ Neville asked.

Dragon grunted and nodded at Hermione, so as to signal her to tell the story. He rose from his seat and rolled up his left sleeve to check his watch. He frowned and then turned to Owl. ‘You have an hour. I’m off to check on Seeker and the other two.’ He ran a hand through his hair. ‘Remember – an hour.’

Harry arched an eyebrow at that cryptic message, but his eyebrow went beyond his hairline when Owl flinched when Dragon slammed the door. He looked at her enquiringly. There was no need to voice the question in his mind.

Owl raised her hands as if surrendering and sighed. ‘I’m sorry for this. Sorry to keep you waiting like this, since I suspect you were both quite worried.’

‘That would be correct,’ Neville said. Harry only nodded silently.

Owl massaged the back of her neck tiredly, rotating it until the bones beneath her skin cracked. ‘Liam’s team in Leicester was attacked yesterday night.’

‘Liam?’

‘Oh, sorry. That’s Squeamish. Liam Rowt, Captain of the Runespoor Team.’

‘Right.’

Owl bit her nail and frowned. 'All of the Renegade Houses are protected by the same layer of wards. Wards keyed in other wards. Most of which, I created myself.

'The Fidelius Charm is the icing of the cake. Even without it, each of the houses would be safe enough -'

'Isn't the Fidelius the ultimate protection?' Neville asked, confused.

'It is not infallible,' Harry said quietly. Neville winced and sent him a sympathetic look.

'Precisely,' Owl said dismissively. 'And as you already know, it can be thwarted even if the Secret Keeper does not reveal the location. The -'

'How?' Harry asked.

'How what?' Owl asked, slightly annoyed at being interrupted.

'How can you thwart a Fidelius? I have been meaning to ask you this for ages. How can you go around it without getting the Secret Keeper to divulge the location?'

'There are two ways. One, the Secret Keeper is killed -'

'Yeah, I know about that. But in the case of Inchmurrin, Voldemort

was the Secret Keeper – and he is most definitely not dead, unfortunately.’

Owl smirked. ‘Probably the most amazing thing in the Wizarding World is that wizards lack an ounce of logic. They rely too much on magical means, believing them to be unbeatable, when, oftentimes, I bit of sneaking around and a decent amount of brainpower can circumvent them.’

Neville and Harry looked at each other, puzzled.

‘I was doing something for the Renegades a couple of months ago in the Lochs. I saw a bunch of recruits around and wondered what could they possibly be doing in a deserted place such as that one. They were loud and boisterous, bragging about their prowess in their training regime. It didn’t take me long to figure out they were Stage Two recruits.

‘I managed to get hold of one of them and I cast a Tracking Charm on him, then Obliviated him. I followed him under a Disillusionment Charm until he reached the place where the camp was. The moment he entered the camp, he disappeared from my sight and the Tracking Charm became distorted. That moment, I knew there was something protected by a Fidelius Charm there.

‘I went there the following day with Dragon. For the next five days, we worked on locating the perimeter and range of the Fidelius. When we finished, I said to myself “Stage Two Camp is located on Inchmurrin”. If you remember my words the night we attacked the camp, you will know that that phrase did not work. It took me a couple of hours until I found the correct code phrase: InnisMheadhran Stage Two Camp is located on Inchmurrin Island. As soon as I said that, I was included inside the Fidelius and I was able

to see the camp. Sneaking around, perseverance and logic is how you can break the Fidelius.'

'Bloody hell,' Neville wheezed.

Harry remained silent, but he agreed whole-heartedly with Neville. Owl was a frigging genius.

'So you are saying that, as long as you can isolate the perimeter, know already what is inside and get the exact phrase used to create the Fidelius, that protection, long thought to be the ultimate and best, will fall?' Neville asked, dazed.

Owl nodded simply. 'Indeed. Which is why there are many more wards protecting the Renegade Houses, especially since I learnt how to foil the Fidelius.'

'Then how did the Death Eaters get to the house in Leicester?'

Owl let out a strangled cry and buried her face in her hands. 'There are only two options. One; they found a way to thwart my wards – no, it is not impossible,' she added, when she saw the look of disbelief on Harry's face. 'Unlikely, yes. But I know of at least two enemies who have enough brainpower to manage to destroy my wards: one, Voldemort himself; two, the Unnameable Number Four, Ares. To my best knowledge, those are the only two who could have done it.'

'Not Artemis?' Neville inquired.

Owl shook her head. 'No, she is the best fighter Voldemort has, a prodigy in the duel arena, and she is highly intelligent - but she is not the genius Ares, Voldemort or myself are,' she said matter-of-factly,

miraculously sounding realistic instead of arrogant.

Harry could accept that. 'What is the other option?' he asked, a sneaking suspicion growing inside him.

Owl looked at him square in the eye. 'We may have a spy.'

Neville gasped, horrified, but Harry found that option very likely. He was not unfamiliar with spies. After all, he had known two of them. One had sent his parents to their deaths unwillingly; the other had willingly doomed them. Needless to say, Harry was not very fond of spies.

Owl rolled up her sleeve and checked her watch, just as Dragon had done. 'Put up your hoods. Time is nearly up,' she said strictly, in a voice that told them they had no other option other than to obey her orders. Her gaze softened considerable as she looked at Harry. 'There are three people I'd want you to meet. Two are going to need your help and reassurance, but I think that the other one will mean something to you, Gryffindor.'

Harry's curiosity had been piqued. However, for the next few minutes, he said nothing and waited in silence, his mind drifting to the attack in Leicester. He wished that there was no spy in the Renegade ranks, but knowing the full story of the Order of the Phoenix, he knew that it was a very likely possibility. In any case, he was glad to know that to know had new wards and he hoped that Owl had trusted nobody with that information.

Knock, knock.

'Come in,' Owl said.

The door opened and in came four hooded figures. Once the door was closed, one of them lowered his hood: Dragon. Dragon and

other two figures, a man and a woman, in Harry's opinion, drew up a chair and sat down. The other one stood by the door and leaned on it, crossing his arms and legs.

Owl looked at him. 'Seeker, if you will...?'

'Are you sure this is a good idea, Owl?' Seeker asked dubiously.

'Yes, it is.'

The moment Seeker spoke, Harry's eyes opened wide. He knew that voice, he recognised it from his past. He shook his head in open disbelief. He had buried the guilt, the horror, the terror, but that otherworldly voice would be forever in his memory.

Seeker lowered his hood. Cedric Diggory.

Four people gasped. Harry rose to his feet and walked up to Cedric, He was amused for a moment, he remembered him so much taller, and now Cedric was a bit shorter than him. Cedric was looking at him apprehensively, but relaxed immediately when Harry held out his hand to him.

'Gryffindor,' he stated, shaking his hand firmly.

Harry nodded and then did something that was probably very reckless considering the current situation, but so Harry Potter. He tugged at Cedric's hand and pulled him closer, his face an inch away from Cedric's ear.

'I kept my promise, I brought your body back,' he whispered.

Cedric's eyes opened like saucers. 'You – you – you are -?' he stuttered.

Harry nodded. 'Yeah, I am.' He released Cedric's hand, amused at his reaction.

Cedric shook his head. 'I need to – think. Alone. Bloody hell.' He spun on his heel and exited the door, shutting it behind him, leaving a bemused Harry inside.

Harry turned to Owl and pierced her with his eyes, making her fidget in her seat. Before she knew it, he had hoisted her up to her feet and was hugging her tightly. 'Thank you,' he said in a constricted voice.

She patted him on the back as Harry released his grip on her. He sat down awkwardly, a lump in his throat. He was more touched than he could put in words. Owl was not Hermione, but she was a good friend on her own. There was so much more about her than her steely, brilliant self.

Then, Harry realised something. Four people had gasped when Cedric lowered his hood. Four. Neville and himself, it was understandable, but why would the other two figures gasp at the sight of Cedric? It just couldn't be. Unless...

'Who are you?' he asked.

The two figures hunched forward, as if trying to make themselves disappear. They were scared, clearly, and did not want to answer to Harry's commanding question. They wore customary Renegade robes, only a pair of glinting white orbs could be seen where the eyes should be.

'It's all right, go ahead,' Owl said comfortingly, putting a hand on the

woman's shoulder. 'If anyone can understand you, it's these two. Gryffindor, Avenger – if you could...?'

Harry found himself in Cedric's position. He did not want to give up on his concealment of his identity in front of those strangers. He knew that his temporary veil of secrecy was paramount, at least until all the Horcruxes were destroyed. He could not afford to have word out before he had obliterated all of the Horcruxes, lest that Voldemort changed their location and made the quest even more difficult than it already was. He had already found a tremendous obstacle when he realised that Nagini was no Horcrux in this world and that he would need to look for the last one from scratch, with no previous idea of what it could be or where it could be located.

However, he trusted Owl with his life. Nodding slightly at Neville, he lowered his hood.

'Harry?' the cloaked man asked, astonishment leaking from his voice. He didn't wait another second and got rid of his hood, too. It was Justin. 'How did you -? What's going on?'

'That's why nobody has been able to spot you anywhere, Mr Potter,' the woman said. She held out her thin, white fingers and unmasked herself. 'It is not that you were well hidden. It was that you had left to a place where nobody could follow you,' Professor Sinistra stated, her black orbs shining with relief.

'Bloody hell,' Neville rasped.

Dragon coughed to clear his throat. 'Do you see why they might be a problem? Everyone in this team saw the bodies of their counterparts. Considering the current state of affairs, we do not want word to leak out. Especially because it would put your secrecy at stake,

Gryffindor.'

Harry nodded. They had been put into quite a precarious knot. On the one hand, he was happy to see two people from his world, two people who knew where he came from. On the other hand, it both put his task and their safety at risk. Loony and Eton had been fighters. Professor Sinistra and Justin weren't.

'What will happen to you two?' Harry asked.

'They will be taken away to a secure location and will remain hidden with other refugees,' Owl said, matter-of-factly. 'If so they wish to, they can train until one of us deems them fit to battle. If not, they can stay there as long as they want.'

Justin snorted in disbelief. 'I will fight when I'm ready. Dumbledore's Army!' he cried fanatically.

Harry and Neville both smiled at that. It seemed like a lifetime ago when that defence club had been formed. Harry had been so unwilling at first to allow Hermione to carry out her mad plan with him as the leader; but after, not only had he enjoyed it, but found in it, two years after it was founded, a web of friendship, trust and loyalty. He would never forget the cries and shouts of Dumbledore's Army in the Battle of Hogwarts. He could never erase the wash of feelings of strength and gratitude that rushed through him when he was lying immobile in Hagrid's arms. Nothing, not even Voldemort, had managed to quell the spirit of it – and, dare he say it, he was bloody well proud of them.

'How did you get here?' Neville asked, a pensive look on his face.

Justin ran a hand through his hair. 'We both appeared in a field of

corpses – that's where we were told our counterparts died.' He grimaced slightly, and Harry understood why. It must not be pleasant to think about yourself dying. 'I popped in first and wandered around for a while, then Professor Sinistra materialised out of thin air. After a while of meaningless walking, she found a Portkey inside her robes and it took us back here. Let me tell you, it was a bit of a nasty surprise when Owl here saw us,' he added, chuckling darkly.

'I can imagine,' Harry inputted.

'Dragon put us through exhaustive tests to check if we were who we said to be; and ever since then, we have been hiding here,' Professor Sinistra prompted.

'So what is the plan now?' Harry asked.

Owl massaged her jaw tiredly. 'Like I said, they are going to be taken to a secure location.' She glanced at Harry, giving him a half-reproachful, half-amused look. 'You know who is going to take them, Gryffindor. You saw him at the funeral.'

Ah, yes. The robed man Owl was talking to when she thought nobody was looking. 'Do you trust him?'

She gave him a calculating stare. 'With my life.'

Harry nodded. That was good enough for him. 'So what is he going to do? Pick them up?'

Dragon glanced at his watch and frowned. 'He should have already arrived. He is late by five minutes.' He turned to Owl. 'Did he say that he might be late? Some meeting or something that might have held him up?'

Owl shook her head and wringed her hands under the table. 'No. He didn't say anything. But he some have detained or something. You know just how busy he is.'

Dragon acquiesced silently and Harry couldn't help have his curiosity immediately aroused. He knew that whoever the robed man was, he had to be someone whose safety and privacy had to be protected at all costs. Harry would even bet that the mystery man was a basket that hung around the enemy's hand often, and as such, the secrecy was tantamount.

Owl turned her head sharply towards Harry. 'You must leave before he comes.'

'Why?' Harry asked.

'Because he wishes to remain as unknown as possible. He is aware that you know of his existence, but he doesn't want you to pick on any clues he may possibly leave behind.' She gave him a sad smile. 'I do know that you are too curious for your own good, Harry.'

'Owl,' Neville interjected suddenly, frowning. 'There was an attack scheduled on the fourteenth. Is it still on?'

Dragon and Owl shared a mutinous look that Harry could not decipher. Then, Owl turned to Neville and shook her head. 'No, it's been postponed until further notice. We cannot hope to survive such an attack with our teams as crippled as they are.'

'Teams?' Harry asked blankly.

Owl nodded. 'Yes, teams. Two teams in fact, Squeamish's and my own. Which reminds me -' she turned to look at Dragon, her face set in grim lines, '- Squeamish is gone. He has not been inspected. He went off to check on Keeper -'

Dragon ran a hand over his ginger stubble and sighed tiredly. 'Leave him be. He has gone through a terrible emotional upheaval. He will be inspected whenever he comes back.'

Owl frowned reprovingly. 'Be that as it may, he is not setting a good example. You just can't have captains running amok -'

Dragon waved a hand at dismissively. 'Let it drop, Owl. I do not suspect Squeamish, he is anything but loyal -'

'I wasn't saying that I did!' Owl protested. 'Just that he -'

'I know, but you are too uptight and too set on following the rules sometimes -'

'It's these rules that have kept us alive this long!' Owl growled, her face flushed in anger.

'Owl, stop,' Dragon ordered, effectively shutting her up. 'You know as well as I do that Renegades from other Houses have been running wildly all over the country to get here. They keep popping in and out. By the time we have gone through all of them, Squeamish will be back. And you know he is absolute rubbish at Occlumency.'

'Yes, I know but -' Dragon gave her a look, telling her inaudibly to keep her mouth close. 'Fine, but if more Renegades start refusing to

follow protocols that were set for our safety because they have gone through a traumatic experience, and then more Renegades end up dead, do not blame me.'

Owl had just crossed a line, and she realised it when she finished her sentence. She bit her cheek remorsefully, pleading with her eyes at Dragon. Dragon, however, chose to ignore her and pretend she just wasn't there. Of course, the anger in his eyes could fool nobody.

Harry had been silent throughout the entire argument. He felt it would be better not to chip in. After all, he knew next to nothing about the rules of the Renegades. However, Owl had a point. They had been living stealthily for years, and that veil of secrecy was probably the only thing that kept them off their tombs. But he also understood Dragon's point of view. After he lost Sirius, talking about the Ministry was the last thing he had wanted to do (in fact, he actually never discussed the loss of his godfather with anyone), so he could see why Dragon wanted to give his friend and trustworthy ally some time to rest his inner demons.

Still, it looked as if the wolf had entered the sheepfold. He would have to stay alert.

-oOoOoOoOo-

The walls and floor were originally made of gleaming and hand-polished white marble, but the dim torches that hung on the walls and the regal black chandelier that was suspended from the ceiling cast a potent, otherworldly gamboge light on them, resulting in a strange, weak vermillion colour to the room; a stark contrast with the starless night beyond the walls of the house.

In the middle of the room, on an altar, a lonely swivel chair stood. The caquetoire was of exquisite craftsmanship. The Queensland walnut wood was old, very old, and even the most inept of furniture amateurs would immediately classify it as an antique. The seat was

carved and bare, but the back was elaborately shaped. Engraved on the wood in silver was the image of a deadly-looking snake with its fangs poised, coiling around swirling flames, ready to strike. On top of the flames, an inverted eight lay, the symbol of eternity. Below the snake, the coat of arms was emblazoned by sharp gothic letters reading Δεν βρέθηκαν λέξεις.

The owner of the house walked into the room and smiled perversely at the Greek letters, like she always did. 'Knowledge is power, indeed.'

She climbed up the steps that led to the altar and deposited her silver bow at the feet of the caquetoire, leaving it at a curved angle. She sat down graciously, resting her back leather quiver safely on her lap.

As she waited, she drew out an arrow from the quiver and held it between the tips of her two index fingers. The red eyes behind the crimson hood inspected it dutifully, carefully going through every little detail.

The shaft and nock were sturdy, rigid and made of the deepest black; while the fletching, spine and head were pure silver. Only the trained, keen eye could see, however, that at the tip of the head, there was a smudge of arsenic grey.

She smiled almost lasciviously at it. If that arrow hit its target, then there was no hope for the poor soul inside the body. There was only one remedy to that poison that was imbibed inside the spear, and the chances of running across a phoenix who would willingly give its tears away were so slim it was laughable.

She smirked in satisfaction. No matter how many times her master praised the qualities of the Basilisk venom, she was more partial to Dementor blood. It was just as deadly, and way faster than the Snake King's poison – to her, that meant less chances of her prey getting away. Her master revelled in torture. She, however, was swift and

effective, never letting her target get away. She would never confess it, but she thought that blood games were beneath her.

She did not like to play with her food, and much less construct pieces of shady art with it like Ares liked to do, on the rare occasion he took part in a fight. Her lips curved up in displeasure. Such macabre displays of gore and bloodbath were known to be Ares's favourite pastime, and she hated them. She had had many arguments about it years before, but she finally gave up on it when he sent her his idea of a present. The gruesome, ghastly corpse of a male Renegade, shaped by magic and knife into the form of the Dark Mark.

She had vomited and felt sick for days after that show of entrails and organs, and after that, she merely tried to avoid Ares as much as inconspicuously possible. Out of all the Unnameables, he was the only one he did not like. Still, she could not deny the man's genius. Were he not a prodigy, he would have killed himself. Perhaps she would have even lowered herself to some useless bloodlust. Shame.

She twirled the arrow between her fingers before she stashed it inside the quiver, her mind still on her fellow Unnameable. She sometimes resented her master for lauding her as his right hand. Despite her shameful origin, she was the oldest and most apt in the Unmentionable ranks. Her position spread fear and jealousy through the Dark hierarchy. There had even been some attempts on her life when she was younger. Of course, the perpetrators had been publicly punished, but the envy did not stop.

‘And it never will,’ she whispered between her teeth.

She sighed tiredly. Being the Dark Lord's heiress was no easy task. She was entrusted with the most important of duties and had to look over absolutely everything her fellow Unnameables did. At least she was not in charge of the Death Eater activities. Thank Merlin for that, because she despised most of the Death Eaters.

She considered them lowly and useless beasts. Inept, ineffective – worthless. The only ones that met her approval were a fair few: Malfoy, Lestrangle, the late Lestrangle, Dolohov, Bellatrix. If she had to pick a favourite, she would most definitely choose Lucius Malfoy. It was not because he belonged to one of the purest families in existence (although if the nasty tongues were to be believed, his father, Abraxas, had been the half-blood son of a pureblood and a Muggle mother), but because he portrayed all the virtues a Death Eater should have: elegant, well-mannered, pulchritudinous, sharp, quick-witted, highly intelligent, efficient, controlled.

Perhaps she was biased on his behalf. After all, she had lived at Malfoy Manor for several years, when the Dark Lord had been reduced to a weak spirit. She had been very close to both Narcissa and Draco as a child. Lucius was a different matter. He had been her teacher; he was strict and demanding, but deep down, he knew that the aristocrat had learnt to care for her like a daughter. Sometimes, when she thought about it, it amused her to no end. Lucius had, after all, hated her blood father – but he had never blamed her for her family blood, he had never made a point to treat her poorly because of it. He had, most likely, forgotten where his roots lay. She had no problem with that.

She was happy to see him as Minister. Even though it was the Dark Lord behind the position, pulling the strings, Lucius deserved the prestige. She guessed he had been rewarded with it because of how well he had brought her up. With the exceptions of Aphrodite and Hades, he had trained three Unnameables for the Dark Lord: Apollo, Ares and herself, Artemis. He had done a magnificent job.

She heard a distant chime of bells and looked up. Checking that her hood was in place, she waved her wand lazily. A portal appeared in front of her, and the man she had been waiting for materialised out of thin air and landed unceremoniously on the steps of the altar.

Her lips curled up in disgust. If there was one Death Eater she despised, it was him. Nothing was worse than a double-crosser, even if this particular one was, for the most part, on their side.

‘My Lady,’ he mumbled, as he stood up clumsily and bowed to her repeatedly.

She waved her hand at him dismissively, motioning him to stop snivelling and get on with the information. ‘What news do you bring me, Death Eater?’ she couldn’t keep the revulsion out of her voice when she pronounced the last two words.

He bowed again. ‘The attack has been postponed, Mistress.’

Artemis sighed in relief. Thank Merlin. ‘Good. We will now be able to relocate the – ah, delicate valuables before they strike. Anything else?’

He nodded rapturously. ‘My Lady, I was informed that three hundred Death Eaters are prepared to strike Diagon Alley on the fourteenth, in case the delay is cancelled. And there is a reserve of another one hundred in case we run into some – difficulties.’

Artemis smirked behind her hood. ‘Excellent.’

Encouraged by Artemis’s approval, the Death Eater bowed again and kissed the hem of her robes. ‘I live to serve you, My Lady.’

Artemis frowned, annoyed. She had always hated this holier-than-thou attitude she was supposed to have. ‘And what about this mysterious figure, the so called Gryffindor?’

The Death Eater flinched and seemed to shrink before her eyes. ‘Nothing, My Lady. I only know that he is bizarrely close to Dragon, Captain Owl and Renegade Snorkack. He is usually accompanied by

another mysterious person, Avenger. Gryffindor is powerful – out of your league, though. But that is all I have gathered.'

She nodded swiftly. She already knew that. The lack of information about that secretive fiend was heavily disappointing, but she could not punish the Death Eater in front of him because of it. It had not been his duty at the time to dig up information on the so-called Gryffindor.

'Very well. And what about that particularly annoying Mudblood?' she asked, edging closer to the border of her chair.

Eager to please her, the Death Eater bowed again. 'My Lady, she does not suspect that she will be the next target. I have managed to cast a tracking charm on her, so you will be able to locate her whenever she leaves the safety of the House.'

She would not admit it, but she was impressed. Hold back something a Death Eater holds dear and they will be efficient, for once in their lives. 'You have done well, Death Eater.' She rose to her feet flung her bow over her shoulders. Gently, she picked an arrow from her quiver. 'You have kept your end of the deal. They will be allowed to remain alive, for the moment.'

The Death Eater was all words of gratitude as he snivelled at her feet. Merlin, how she hated it.

'You do know however that if the other two are spotted...?'

The Death Eater's eyes turned glassy for a moment, filled with regret. 'I know, My Lady. Still, I can only thank you enough for forgiving the lives of two of them. You are the most gracious, merciful -'

'Enough,' she interrupted, fed up with the downpour of flattering

words. 'You may leave. Go see Ares, he will modify your memory.' He bowed at her, as he started to retreat slowly. 'Now,' she growled.

The Death Eater needn't be told twice. He squeaked and Portkeyed out of her house quickly.

She held an arrow between her index and middle fingers and slowly raised her silver composite bow. Some would, perhaps, question her choice. She preferred the Asian design instead of the typical English longbow. Carefully, she pushed back the string, made of the hair of an especially sturdy unicorn. With her fingers, she set her arrow in place and raised the bow up to eye-level.

'Appear,' she hissed.

Sixty feet away, a small picture of an *Athene Noctua* appeared. For a moment, Artemis could swear that there was a little voice inside her pleading with her, begging her not to do it.

She shook her head and pushed the string backward, her fingers feeling the pressure building up around her bow.

She set her eyes on the beak of the owl and waited. Archery was about patience, about the art of stalking your prey, about the elegance of realising your hold on the arrow until the last moment.

She watched, almost transfixed, how the arrow shot forward when she released her hold on it. Mesmerised, she saw the rigid wood curve itself upwards, the head shining, and the fletching whistling. She felt her heart skip a beat when her arrow tore through the image of the owl.

'Bull's eye,' she grunted, satisfied.

In archery and in life, it was imperative to strangle those little annoying and hesitating voices. If you were to become the predator, you could leave no ground for small doubts. You had to strike. You had to dominate. You had to reign. You had to be the Master.

You had to be the wolf in the sheepfold.

-oOoOoOoOo-

The morning of the thirteenth of January dawned chilly, with overcast skies and sharp winds. That morning, Harry found himself inside Hagrid's cabin, accompanied by none else than his godfather, Sirius Black.

At first, he had been reluctant to go, but after his discussion with Dumbledore, he promised himself that he would make a serious effort to establish bonds with his family, no matter how bizarre and spooky it still seemed to him.

To be honest, to him, it was as if he had been trapped inside a dream. A most strange and twisted one, but a dream nonetheless. However, ten minutes with Sirius brought back the old warmth and familiarity he felt in his presence, and he could only wonder what it would be like if his father was the one speaking to him.

Unwittingly, he found himself unravelling his secrets and fears in front of Sirius, telling him everything that was going on, everything that bothered him. Well, almost everything. He still kept his true identity hidden. He knew he would have to drop the bomb at some point, but he was just not ready for it.

‘Blimey, Gryffindor, your life is quite mucked up at the moment, isn't it?’ Sirius asked, his hands gripping tightly the neck of the bottle that lay in front of him.

Harry nodded grimly. 'Tell me about it. And after this visit, I have to go straight to my place and somehow knock myself out. I need to sleep, Sirius,' he added, when he saw the look of worried bewilderment that flashed across his godfather's eyes. 'Avenger and I are going on a Horcrux fun hunt as soon as night falls.'

'That is both excellent and pretty crappy, mate. One the one hand, you get to kick Voldemort where it hurts; but one the other hand, you risk your life to destroy some piece of evil family jewellery. Doesn't sound like a fair deal to me.'

Harry laughed. Merlin, he had missed Sirius. 'That's me, the Vanquisher of the Dark Lord's family jewels.' Sirius roared with laughter and Harry winced. 'Perhaps that didn't come out right.'

Sirius chortled. 'Oh, blimey, that was brilliant. Wait till I tell James you said that.' He shook his shaggy head, still chuckling. 'Or perhaps I shouldn't tell James. He is a tad miffed at you at the present time.'

Harry's ears perked up at that. 'Why so?'

His godfather shrugged. 'He thinks you made Michael mad.'

Harry arched an eyebrow. 'Oh?'

Sirius produced another bottle of Firewhiskey out of thin air. She drew out a knife and cut through the plastic around its neck and tore at the lid. Without bothering to get up to find a glass, he lifted the bottle by its neck and took a generous swig, wiping his mouth with his sleeve. 'Too right. Michael has been downright pissy for the past week. Reminds me of Remus when he was with PMS.' He gave an involuntary shudder.

'Er, but isn't Remus a – you know, a man?' Harry asked, confused.

Sirius chuckled. 'Pre-Moony Syndrome, Gryffindor.'

'Oh, right. His furry little problem. Got it,' said Harry, dazed.

Sirius sent him a shrewd look, and Harry could almost see the wheels turning in his head. 'You are sometimes too knowledgeable, Gryffindor, not to be suspicious.'

Harry squirmed under his calculating eyes, trying to no avail to make himself as small and invisible as possible. He cursed himself silently. He should have never said anything that might jeopardise his secrecy. Next, he would be yelling from the rooftops that he was Harry Potter and joy to the freaking world.

Sirius lifted his hands in a pacifying manner. 'Hey, I'm not accusing you of anything. Considering the position you are in, I'm bloody ecstatic that you know your stuff or else we would be seriously doomed. It's just weird to see how much you know – even the smallest details such as Remus's "furry little problem".' He lowered his hands and took another shot of Firewhiskey. 'Ah, excellent stuff. So anyway – Michael and James. Michael has been bloody moody for the past week, and James reckons it has to do with you.'

'Did Michael... say anything?' Harry asked tentatively.

Sirius shook his wild mane. 'No. That boy never says anything. He bottles everything up. Until he explodes, that is. Must be his Slytherin tendencies, because I really dunno where he gets it from. Us Gryffindors just storm and wreak havoc when we are angry.'

Harry suffused a blush. He did bottle things up until he exploded. His mind went back to that awful summer after Fourth Year, and how he had burst into deafening dulcets when he got to Grimmauld Place.

George used to say that his eardrums had never been the same again after that night.

‘Right. So how does da- James -’ he corrected just in time, ‘how does James work that out?’

Sirius gave him a penetrating, slightly patronising look. ‘James knows his son, as I know my nephew. Had he been miffed at his inbred classmates, he would have ranted and raved about them until he felt better. He only bottles things up when something gets under his skin – and to be honest, you are the only explanation for this.’

Harry sighed, defeated. ‘You are both right. Michael and I had a – er, a mild disagreement a few days ago.’

Sirius raised his eyebrows. ‘A mild disagreement that caused the Whomping Willow to burn to ashes?’ he asked, sceptically.

Harry winced. ‘All right. It may have been a fully blown-out argument.’

‘Too right.’ He rolled up his sleeves and Harry gasped in horror. Where Sirius’s “Disgrace” mark was, there were now several cuts and bruises adorning it. ‘Got blamed for it, too.’

‘I’m sorry, Sirius,’ apologised Harry, truly meaning it. He was ashamed; Dumbledore had been so right about the utmost importance of keeping his emotions in check. Otherwise others will get hurt, Harry thought, as he stared at Sirius’s beaten up arm.

Sirius rolled down his sleeve and shrugged nonchalantly. ‘S’all right, mate. I get roughed up pretty often, so it’s no big hassle.’

‘You do?’ asked Harry, taken aback.

His godfather nodded. ‘Yeah. Comes with being a Pure-blood Disgrace. Occupational hazard,’ he added flippantly.

Harry frowned at his light tone. ‘You shouldn’t have to deal with this sort of treatment.’

Sirius shrugged again. ‘Meh, I got worse during the war.’ He ran a hand through his unkempt hair, his eyes slightly vacant, as if he were remembering long gone days. Turning back to Harry, with a slightly bewildered expression, he said, ‘To be honest, I’m damn grateful that neither James, Michael nor I are getting worse from them. We get roughed up, yeah, but that is about it. We are still alive, and that’s what matters. Sometimes I think that we do have some sort of guardian angel watching our backs, you know?’

Harry stared at Sirius, puzzled, clearly not knowing what he was talking about. Perhaps some of his confusion had been apparent on his face, because Sirius chuckled lightly at him. ‘Look,’ he said as he took another swig of whisky, ‘no matter how much we annoy the Death Eaters, we are still around. We reckon it’s because of our bank accounts and the fact that we still have Pure-blood in our veins.’

Harry was still flummoxed. ‘How do you work that out?’

Sirius rested his weight on the back of his chair and glanced at his surroundings, a pensive expression on his features. ‘A Wizard’s Will must be done willingly. You don’t even need to go to Gringott’s to write a testament in parchment and ink. A Will comes out of your heart’s desire, and the moment you die, a parchment with your Will appears in the bank. Wills are absolute, they cannot be hoodwinked. You are either the rightful heir or you are not. You cannot seize an inheritance by force, just as you cannot force someone to leave you their goods, because a Will only follows your heart’s desire.’

He scratched the back of his head absentmindedly. 'So my guess is that they keep us both alive so they can access our vaults and to see if they can convince us to sire appropriate offspring. Fat chance,' he finished derisively, a look of utter disgust on his face.

Harry frowned. He hadn't known that. It made sense. Sort of. 'What about Michael?' He asked, confused. After all, using Voldemort's language, Michael was a half-blood, the son of a Pure-blood Disgrace and a Mudblood. Why was it that he was still alive?

Sirius sighed. For a moment, he looked as haggard and eerie as he had when Harry had met him all those years ago in the Shrieking Shack. 'Michael is alive because...' he hesitated and grimaced. 'He is alive because James and I both threatened to commit suicide if anything happened to him, which would render our vaults useless for all eternity.'

A flash of fierce love flared through Sirius's eyes, sending goosebumps all over Harry's skin. 'There is nothing – nothing, Gryffindor, that James wouldn't do for his son. Just like there is nothing I wouldn't do for my nephew.'

And Harry believed him, as some sort of warmth and affection spread through all of his body, his nerves tingling and his heart beating forcefully against his chest.

It was that moment, alone with his beaten and emotionally-drained godfather in a dusty and damp cabin, surrounded by cobwebs that not even the efficient and diligent Kreacher could get rid of, when Harry realised that he was not the wolf in the sheepfold. He was not an intruder. He was the son of James and Lily, the godson of Sirius, the brother of Michael. It dawned on him that whenever he revealed himself to them, he would find a place in that strange and yet united family.

He felt his spirits soar.

-oOoOoOoOo-

The village of Little Hangleton was spookily quiet. The only sounds that could be heard were the faint susurrus coming from the night-time, invisible winds and the low rumbles that emanated from the trees around. Occasionally, the crunch and snapping of a twig or branch could be caught, but other than that, night had fallen over the small village and with it came a blanket of silence.

The cobbled streets were derelict and almost abandoned. The village was nearly a ghost town. Discarded and stained papers from past years peeled off of the walls of the building and houses, giving the village an old, rusty air. Few streetlamps were lit, and none by electrical means. Small flames flickered inside the corroded lamps, their crackling muffled by the blackened panes, as they cast a small and barely visible light upon the streets.

Possibly the most disconcerting fact about the village of Little Hangleton was that, or so it seemed, the proportionally biggest disturbances did not come from the town itself, but from the cemetery. The graveyard in itself was daunting, forbidding. It looked and if someone had read a dark book about evil witches and warlocks who performed dark rituals in a necropolis and plastered it in the churchyard of Little Hangleton. The villagers only came by when it was absolutely necessary, when someone close to them had died and they needed to bury the deceased. They never went to lay flowers on the relatives' and friends' tombs. The mere mention of the graveyard sent chills through their spines; it was almost a taboo. "Creepy", "haunted", they called it.

And they were right.

Perhaps the standards and ideas of creepiness and haunted the villagers had did not match with the reality, but they were

nonetheless correct. The villagers believed the cemetery was occupied by tortured spirits of their deceased ancestors. Ghosts draped with black sheets and gleaming white nondescript faces; ghosts that glided and whispered in the cold hours of the night...

Of course, the villagers were all Muggles and didn't know of the existence of Death Eaters. Their ghosts were not dead, after all, but solid, living and breathing.

That night, there were six of them. One, sitting on a cracked, mossy tomb, his head between his bent knees and his hands massaging his scalp. Two and three, hunched over a tombstone, looking like they were having a silent yet heated argument. Four, circling an ample perimeter, alert. Five, wringing his left hand impassionedly while holding a cigarette with his right one; talking quickly. Six, impassive, leaning on a death angel statue with his legs and arms crossed, his wand in his right hand pointing at the skies above, listening to the smoking Death Eater.

'I'm telling you, I'm more than fit to carry this out alone!' he protested as he brought the cigarette to his lips and took a generous drag. 'I was the one who concocted this!' He added, his face twisted in anger.

Number kept his aristocratic features aloof and distant, as if he were bored by the tirade. He would have loved to yawn at the Death Eater's diatribe, but his father had always said that politeness was the mark of a regal Pure-blood, and that lesson had been deeply ingrained in his mind since he was a small toddler.

'To what, may I ask, is this sudden boldness due to? I never pegged you as the daredevil type,' he drawled, a small smirk threatening to appear on his lips.

The Death Eater, shorter than him by a foot, sputtered incoherent nonsense between his teeth. 'I merely wanted -' he hesitated.

Number six nodded. 'Perhaps you feel that your prowess and abilities have been overlooked and underestimated so far? Tsk, tsk. That won't do. I will make it my duty to speak with the Dark Lord about this matter. Rest assured, you will be given more dangerous tasks from now on,' he twanged, amused.

The Death Eater stammered. 'I – I didn't m-mean – I only think that it is my p-place -'

Number six leaped off the statue and advanced on the now cowering Death Eater, his face twisted in a sneer. 'You forget, you filthy piece of scum, who you are talking to. The fact that you are old enough to be my father and have spent more years in the Dark Lord's ranks than I have does not influence the reality that I'm above you, Death Eater,' he spat, digging his wand forcefully up the hollow of the man's neck until he drew blood. 'Never forget, you useless lump, that you are talking to an Unmentionable and not a slimy, disgusting Death Eater such as yourself.'

The Death Eater took a step back, clearly frightened and the Unmentionable basked in the delight his position gave him. He was meant to be that powerful, it was in his blood. 'Now scurry off and do something good like Yaxley over there. And put out that bloody fag, it's unbecoming for a Death Eater to take up such a lowly, stinking Muggle vice. '

He smirked as he watched the Death Eater hurrying away, leaning back on the statue behind him. He turned to his left and read the name on the tombstone. 'Tom Riddle,' he whispered. 'I wonder who he was?' he mused distractedly. He frowned; he had seen that name somewhere, but where?

Suddenly, his pocket vibrated. He looked up ahead, alert, his nerves

tingling with anticipation. He checked his watch: five in the morning. Squinting through his eyes, he waited.

There! Ahead of him, in the distance, near the Gaunt Shack, he could see two spots of light. Adrenaline spiked through his body. The muscles under his skin tautened. He raised his hood and gave the signal mark.

‘All right, let the fun begin,’ he drawled and Apparated away.

-oOoOoOoOo-

The Gaunt Shack was off the beaten track, deserted, mossy, with broken tiles and mouldy wood planks and inhabited only by big, mean spiders. If Ron Weasley had seen the inside of the hovel, he would have blanched and fled immediately.

The hut had not seen any inhabitants for a very long, long time. If it were truly sentient, perhaps it would say that it was better that way, for the last owners who lived there had been insane and filthy, that it was better to live in the wild without a real master. The Weasleys’ old Ford Anglia would most certainly agree with that statement, even though its previous owners had not been nearly as bad, not by a long shot.

Then again, the house had not been completely deserted. Sometimes, its current owner rolled in and out to check on some heirloom he had left there, and added strange, protective magic around it. Lately, a small, green-eyed, green-robed stranger had come by and added more magic around the heirloom and the house itself to protect it. Strange boy, that one.

It seemed that the shack would have some visitors again that night. The small awareness inside was eager to see more magic tricks. The floors creaked in anticipation.

Just then, two figures appeared out of nowhere in a haze of flames. At once, the tallest released the smallest from his grip and straightened his very ruffled robes.

‘Why is it that when I flame in an out my clothes twist around my delicate bits?’ Harry asked morosely.

Neville chuckled lightly. ‘Dunno, mate.’ He turned to glance at his surroundings, taking in the state of the hovel. His eyebrows shot up. ‘Blimey. So this is where Voldemort’s mum was raised? No wonder she ran away.’

Harry nodded sombrely. ‘Yeah, and that’s not the worst of it. She lived abused, her spirit was beaten.’ Neville arched an eyebrow at him and Harry shrugged. ‘Well, at least that is what Dumbledore told me back in Sixth Year. I still can’t understand why she gave up.’

Neville shook his head sadly. ‘Not everyone has the courage your mother had, Harry. No matter how many times I have heard about your mum’s sacrifice, I still find it unbelievable. She had the chance to flee and yet she chose to stay. Not everyone could do that. In fact, few exceptional people could.’

Harry frowned. ‘I did the same last May,’ he said, confused. It had been bloody hard to choose to lay down his own life, but as Dumbledore would have said, it had been for the greater good. His memories from that night were somewhat hazy and blurry, but he would never forget the sheer terror and angst he felt cursing through his body as he made his way to meet Voldemort in the woods, fully knowing what there was in store for him, fully aware that he only had a few minutes left...

Neville blinked. ‘And you seriously think that you are not exceptional?’ he asked, astounded. He shook his head disbelievingly.

‘You amaze me sometimes, Harry. You, your mum, Dumbledore – even Snape! – belong in a group of unsung heroes.’

‘I do think I have enough fame to last for an entire lifetime, Neville,’ said Harry, uncomfortable at the praise.

Neville shook his head again and patted him on the back. ‘Yeah, you do. But for the wrong reasons. You are famous for ripping Voldemort from his body when you were a baby -’

‘That was all my mum, not me,’ Harry interrupted.

Neville grinned at him, triumphant. ‘Exactly. She should have got the praise and the fame back then, not you. But later, at Hogwarts, it was all you. You had the courage to face Voldemort when you were eleven. You saved your best friend’s sister and nearly died because of it at twelve. At thirteen, you lived with the weight of betrayal on your shoulders, faced a hungry horde of Dementors and saved an innocent man from his fate. At fourteen, you saw your worst nightmare coming true. At fifteen, you lived in ignorance and then watched the closest thing to a father die. At sixteen, you dealt with the idea of having to destroy an immortal enemy and saw your mentor die in front of you. And don’t get me started with last year – you destroyed Voldemort!’

Harry pursed his lips. ‘I don’t know where you are getting to, mate. I’m positive all my adventures have now been published by Rita Skeeter.’ He rolled his eyes. ‘That woman can’t get enough of me.’ He scrunched his nose. ‘Perhaps that didn’t come out right.’

Neville snorted. ‘You really don’t know it, Harry. Of course, by now everyone knows about your heroic deeds. You are material for children’s books and adults’ awe. But do they know what you had to go through? The terror, the courage, the angst, the determination,

the love...? No, they don't. They can't see past your impressive displays. But to those who have been there, Harry,' he paused, looking at Harry straight in the eyes, flames swirling behind his brown orbs, 'To those who have been there, and value you as a person; to those who have seen you grow from skinny midget in glasses to the person you are now – bloody hell, Harry! We look up to you because of the person you are, we are loyal to the death to you because you are Harry – not the Boy-Who-Lived, but the boy who loved this world so much – who loved us so much – that he gave his own life to help protect it!' he finished heatedly. Then, he gave a small, forlorn chuckle and shrugged his shoulders. 'I dunno why I even try to explain this to you. You will never understand it, Harry. That's a part of what makes you so amazing.'

Harry didn't really know what to say. He was moved, deeply so, but still thought that Neville, who seemed to be channelling Dumbledore, was exaggerating. Come to think of it, it was not only Dumbledore that Neville was channelling. He was forcibly reminded of Ginny at Dumbledore's funeral, what she told him when she broke up with her.

He winced slightly as he looked at his friend, seriously hoping that he was wrong. 'You are not about to get all romantic with me, are you?'

Neville blinked twice. Then he did something Harry did not expect: he doubled up and howled with laughter. His knees collapsed and he was soon enough on all fours, banging his fists on the grass.

Harry was embarrassed. All right, so the thought of Neville fancying him was pretty stupid, but could you blame him? It had made sense when it popped into his mind.

Neville staggered to his feet, still chuckling merrily. 'No, Harry. I don't fancy you at all. Don't take this badly, but you are not my type.' He looked as if he had swallowed a pound of lemons; it was so hard to stifle his laughter. He shook his head, trying to regain some of his former composure and sighed. 'Wands out, do you reckon? Can't

see a thing with this starless night.'

Grateful for the change of topic, Harry nodded and drew out his red wand. 'Yeah. Lumos should be safe enough. I don't expect anyone to be here, anyway. But just in case, let's not start a huge fire or something.'

Neville agreed amicably and produced a small light at the tip of his wand, following Harry's lead. 'Why isn't Dumbledore with us?'

Harry huffed as he inspected the house. 'I'm not letting him again around that blasted ring. It was his death sentence last time, and I'm not sure he wouldn't be tempted again by it.' He frowned at the house and walked a small circle around the entrance, his hand lingering on the threshold. 'Gimme a moment now, I need to concentrate.'

He closed his eyes and set his senses free. He inhaled deeply as a barrel of magical imprints washed over him. He had leant from Dumbledore how to sense magic, but after Voldemort had met his demise, all of his senses had gone haywire. The moment he let loose his Occlumency shields, it was as if a tap had been open, as if he had been blind all of his life and all of a sudden, he could see. He nearly fainted at the influx of magical waves he received in one second.

Harry hissed. The house reeked of Voldemort's foul stench. His magic was everywhere: on the threshold, the door, inside and around the house... There were patterns he didn't recognise, but everything that came from Voldemort stank of Dark Magic. The phoenix inside him wanted nothing else but to flee the site, whereas the basilisk delighted in the familiar magic around it.

He was careful not to touch anything, lest something was cursed. He wouldn't put it past Voldemort. The air was stale with its Voldemort's signature, but there was also something else, something foreign that was yet oddly familiar. Harry ran his hands across the front steps,

keeping them an inch away.

‘Someone else has been here,’ he muttered. ‘Recently. Perhaps even today. The magic feels different and isn’t as faded as Voldemort’s is.’ He sniffed the air, trying to separate Voldemort’s mark from the other one. ‘It’s mostly protective, whereas Voldemort’s is offensive.’

Harry frowned and turned to Neville, ‘I dunno how we are going to – what’s wrong mate?’ he asked, looking worried at his friend’s ashen face.

Neville blinked, his face twisted into something Harry didn’t recognise. ‘You can – sense magic? And identify it?’ he said slowly, punctuating every word, as if he couldn’t even dare to think about it.

Harry shrugged. ‘Can’t everyone?’ he asked, a flashback of when his Parselmouth abilities were revealed coming to his mind.

Neville shook his head. ‘No, Harry. Perhaps some can sense a bit of magic, but we certainly cannot see the different types of it around objects. You don’t know how rare that is.’ He gave a low, appreciative whistle, suddenly grinning. ‘That’s seriously wicked.’ He frowned. ‘Right, sorry. I’ll entertain myself and mind my own business. You carry on,’ he finished apologetically, as he sat down on the grass and took out the parcel with the vials of basilisk venom he had brought with him.

Harry spaced out for a while, his mind on what Neville had said. Deep down, he knew that being able to distinguish different kinds of magic to the level he was able to was not something common, but ever since that trip with Dumbledore where he had seen the master at work, he had always thought that any magical being would be able to perceive some of it, at least.

He snapped himself out of his reverie and went back to work, allowing his mind to wander back to the flood of magical stream around and inside the house. He furrowed his eyebrows and remember what he had been about to tell Neville before that revelation of his.

He felt there was something missing. What could it be, Harry didn't know, but his gut told him there was something amiss.

And abrupt and horrible idea hit his brain, and Harry felt his insides clench, hoping that it was not true. He strained his senses, trying his hardest to find it. 'No, no, no...' He didn't even notice Neville standing by his side, worry etched on his features, asking him what was wrong. 'It can't be – no...'

He slumped down on the grass, defeated, feeling as if he had become a hundred years older in just a matter of seconds. He bent his knees and placed his elbow on them, lowering his head so he could run his fingers through his tousled hair. He massaged the back on his scalp lightly, as if hoping it would ease the knots he felt inside.

He raised his head slowly, as if it were the most strenuous and difficult task in the world. Perhaps it was.

Neville was looking at him, distraught, clutching a vial of venom so tightly it was bound to shatter at some point. 'Harry, what's wrong?'

Harry felt like cursing himself for keeping his hopes up. He should have realised something had to go wrong at some point. He sighed, exhaustion washing over him. 'It gone,' he said, deadpanned. 'The Horcrux isn't there.'

Neville's eyes opened up like saucers. His grip faltered and he dropped the vial, its contents spilling all over the grass. The both scrambled away from it, feeling lucky that neither had been sprinkled with it for it was disintegrating the green blades below.

‘What?’

‘It isn’t there, Neville.’ He massaged his temple, looking weary. ‘Believe me; I know what a fragment of Voldemort’s soul feels like. It’s not there. We come all this way for nothing,’ he hissed, suddenly angry and frustrated. He stomped his foot on the ground. ‘Damn it.’

Neville patted him on the back supportively, although he was crestfallen. ‘So what do we do now?’

Harry shrugged, disgruntled. ‘I suppose we have to go back home, empty-handed.’ He shut his eyes tightly. Perhaps he was overreacting, but at that moment, he felt like an utter failure. ‘Blast it; this has just got ten times more complicated. It’s last year all over again.’

Neville scratched the back of his head, trying to no avail to come up with a solution to their hitch. It was all, of course, for naught, and he felt the weight of his world on his round shoulders. ‘Dumbledore,’ he piped up suddenly, struck by inspiration, ‘Dumbledore may have an inkling -’

Harry shook his head in dismay, a sad smile on his lips. ‘No, Dumbledore told me everything he knows about the Horcruxes’ locations.’ Well, thought Harry, minus the snag of him having a shard of Voldemort’s soul inside his body. But in the end, Dumbledore had come clean with him – after a fashion, hadn’t he? ‘Obviously, we will tell him. I doubt he’ll be able to throw any light on this, though.’ He sighed, running a hand over the small stubble on the side of his jaw. ‘Truth is, no matter what a genius he is, it took a trip down into Voldemort’s mind and sheer dumb luck to figure out where he had placed them.’

‘Can you do that again?’ Neville asked, his face alight with hope.

Harry shook his head again. ‘I can’t cheat my way into this, no. The connection ended when he shot the Avada Kedavra at me last May, once and for all.’ He pushed his arms back, leaning back and resting his palms on the moist grass. He crossed his legs as he lifted his up, gazing at the heavens above, feeling, for a fleeting instant, amused at the irony of it all. ‘I never thought there could come a time when I would regret not having a direct link to Voldemort’s mind,’ he said, more to himself than to Neville. He tore his eyes from the skies and gave him a satirical smile. Well, at least we can still count on my vast amounts of sheer dumb luck.’

Neville chuckled lightly. ‘But mate, that’s it!’ He exclaimed happily. ‘If anyone can figure this out, it’s you! There is nobody alive who have ever been that, er – close – to Voldemort!’ he said, half-excited, half-revolted at the thought of being that intimate with someone as foul as the Dark Lord.

Harry sighed. He lifted one of his hands and massaged the back of his tense neck. ‘While that is true, I cannot come up with magical solutions just because I have an idea of how Voldemort’s warped mind works.’ He frowned, adopting a pensive expression. ‘What bugs me is why he felt the need to move the Horcrux. Last time, even with a full war raging on, he never checked up on them – at least he didn’t until the very end. Bit of a nasty shock when he sussed out that they were all missing.’ Neville laughed. ‘However, he has won here, so why would he need to move it.’

Neville shrugged. ‘You tell me. I have no idea.’ He hunched forwards, resting his chin on the base of his dry palm. ‘Perhaps he is worried about the Renegades?’ he suggested.

Harry bit his cheek, pondering that possibility. ‘No, it can’t have been.

Unless -' his eyes opened widely, a sudden realisation hitting him like an axe. 'Unless he knew. Unless he was warned.' He turned his head around so quickly he might have got a whiplash, narrowing his eyes, looking for something. 'Unless someone told him.'

He sprang to his feet to get a clearer sight of his surroundings. After a minute, it dawned on him that there was something missing in the distance. 'The Riddle House. It's not there,' he muttered. 'Did Owl tell you where the attack would take place?'

'No, said Neville,' standing by his side, flummoxed. 'She didn't say anything. Just like last time in Inchmurrin.'

Harry clenched his fists in anger. 'You see the village ahead?' he asked. Not waiting for Neville's response, he continued, 'That's where Voldemort's father and paternal grandparents lived. They had a big, luxurious manor there – and it's missing. I'll bet you anything it is under the Fidelius and that's what Owl discovered. Voldemort must've got wind of the attack and chose to relocate his Horcrux in case some stray Renegades wandered over here and got their hands on his precious soul,' he spat, his fists white and his nails digging deep into his palms.

'So – does that mean – there's – there's a spy?' asked Neville, horrified at the prospect.

Harry nodded curtly. 'It looks like it. We must figure out who it is before a loyal Renegade pays the price for it,' he said harshly, his mind coming up with some violent images. 'I hate spies.' He remembered only too well Wormtail's treason and the pain Snape's apparent betrayal had caused. He would never remember his parents' last words; or the supplicant voice of Dumbledore up in the Astronomy Tower. He would never forget the Dementors and the lament of Fawkes.

They both stayed in silence, each lost in their little world of thoughts and memories until Neville started fidgeting. Harry turned his head to him and saw that he was holding something shiny between his fingers. Curious, he was about to ask him what it was. His interest was substituted but alert and wariness when he saw that Neville's face had gone completely white, as if he had just seen something truly horrific.

‘What’s up? What happened?’ He asked quickly.

Neville said nothing for a while. Then, he placed the object on his open palm and Harry realised it was the old DA coin. He furrowed his brows, confused. ‘Er, what’s that for now?’

Still ashen-faced, Neville said, ‘I always keep it with me, ever since Fifth Year,’ he stated, his visage blank. ‘I have been spending quite a lot of time with the Renegades lately, and told Owl about it. She did something to the coin, so it would be linked to her in case she needed us. In case of an attack. She said it would vibrate if she wanted us there,’ he explained, lowering his eyes to glance at it for a second, then lifting his eyes to look at Harry. ‘And it just did. They are being attacked right now.’

Harry dropped his wand. ‘What? Where? Why didn’t you tell me about this before?’ he hollered.

‘I’m sorry. I just forgot,’ he apologised, too stricken to feel really sorry for his blunder. ‘I don’t know where. She hasn’t sent the loca -’ he cut through his words as the coin vibrated on his sweaty palm. ‘Diagon Alley,’ he whispered. ‘Diagon Alley is under attack now.’

Harry didn’t hesitate one moment. He grabbed Neville’s arm swiftly

and let the phoenix inside him take control as they flamed away.

Thunder threatened the earth below away over the horizon.

-oOoOoOoOo-

They landed in a dodgy and empty place of Knockturn Alley and were momentarily blinded and deafened by the flashes and bangs in the overrun Diagon Alley. The cobbled and usually cheerful magical London was nothing like Harry remembered.

A thunderous roar assailed Harry's ears and he felt his eardrums thumping and protesting inside his head like an angry crowd displeased at their corrupted leader's rivers of broken promises and torn apart families. Harry's eyes failed him fleetingly, overwhelmed by the sudden input of dazzling and flaring lights that stretched around him. His mind went fuzzy with the overbearing influx of overcharged sizzling, volatile magic around him, making him forget briefly where he was.

He opened his bleary eyes, feeling the sting of the choked, sooty air penetrating him. His eyes watered and he coughed, as small particles of dust and grunge invaded his throat and lungs, making him breathe erratically. He forced himself to look at the sight before his eyes, and when he did, he could only wish he never had. He tried to swivel around, but his muscles seemed seized and unresponsive.

Transfixed, he watched the sight before him. A whirlwind of fire and ashes engulfed the perimeter of Diagon Alley, obscuring his view of the usually infested and busy lane. Noxious fumes swirled out of the stocky maze of flames, eclipsing the moon's benevolent light.

Beyond Harry's range of vision, inside the ring of fire, a real inferno was raging on.

The wooden roofs yielded, supplicating and crackling, to the crimson

flames that licked at them mercilessly, melting the old planks into dust, corroding the small pieces of metal around, unstoppable, untameable, ruthless; not caring about the joy and memories the old building held close to their hearts, not caring about anything else but the rush and thrill of their opponent's slow and torturous defeat. The pitiless flames formed a wave of orange and red, their crests rising up to their skies, as if they were contemplating in their victorious and foolhardy attitude, destroying the firmament above, their noxious fumes swirling impetuously, considering their chances against the impervious and impassive heavens.

Piles of human bodies littered over the streets, a gruesome picture taken out of the mind of the most bloodthirsty of assassins. No-one had been spared. No-one was above being struck down. Children, women, men, the elderly, goblins, other creatures. Beheaded, mutilated, impaled with their own wands, their skulls crushed against walls, twisted into the most unnatural angles... It was ghastly enough to make the most veteran and scarred of warriors want to retreat into the safety of an asylum.

People in cloaks sped through the streets, jumping over the corpses with ease, as if they weren't really there, beams of colours lights following them as they responded with another of their own. When they were hit by one, they fell helplessly to the stained pavement, tears streaming down their faces, trying to live up the last moments they had, trying to ignore the excruciating pain that invaded their bodies. Twisting, writhing until the eerie melody of their cries stopped and their thrashing limbs surrendered, their hearts stopped thumping against their chests and their broken souls embraced death.

Harry held his breath as he slumped onto the blackened stones in the shifty corner in front of the Giant Spider's shop. He squirmed a little, trying shift his body in order to avoid the sharp rocks that were cutting on his back. He gulped at the sight of a gigantesque and imposing thirty feet tall fence of fire that blocked the entrance to Diagon Alley. A slow, unwinding sickness rising up his throat from the

pit of his stomach as his heart banged furiously against his breastbone as he gulped at the wall made of fire that blocked their way, making him feel about to swoon. His frazzled nerves sizzled with renewed adrenaline. He held Neville's arm tightly, the tips of his fingers burrowing themselves around his friend's wrist, leaving red marks. But Neville was too distraught to notice, too agitated to care or even notice. He looked as if he was trying his best not to vomit.

‘Stay close to me. Do not stray, under any circumstance,’ he ordered him, his voice firm and unwavering. He spun around and glued his front body to the wall, bending slightly to peer over the corner. ‘Coast is mostly clear,’ he muttered. He turned around and pierced Neville with his eyes. ‘Lift your hood and stay alert. Do not separate yourself from me. If you are wounded, Portkey yourself out – do not be the foolish Gryffindor I am and stay for my sake or the sake of helping the Renegades. You understand?’

Neville nodded mutely as he hid his face behind his features, his hands trembling as he clutched his wand tightly.

‘Listen,’ he said, adopting a softer tone, ‘there’s a real carnage ahead. We must try our best not to linger on the images and keep moving on.’ His throat constricted, bile rising up, his determination faltering at the thought of his next order. ‘I wish we could help the wounded and take them to safety, but being realistic, if it comes to choose between our lives and them, we must pick ourselves. But if we can – we will help the innocent bystanders.’

Neville nodded again, sickened. ‘Disillusionment Charms?’

Harry shook his head. ‘No. There is no point. We are going aggressive, not being stealthy. Plus, if we were invisible we would be separated. I’m not losing another friend to Voldemort’s lackeys,’ he finished fiercely, fire swirling in his eyes. ‘Be ready, we are off.’

They wheeled around the corner, side by side, their arms up, holding their wand at a crooked angle, alert, at the ready, to contemplate the macabre bloodbath ahead. They walked in silent horror, backing each other, doing their best not to scream at the piles of corpses, focusing on following the echo of cries and flashes in the night.

‘Harry,’ whispered Neville. ‘How do we recognise who is a Death Eater and who is not?’

‘Do not attack unless attacked. The Renegades will recognise us, the Death Eaters won’t,’ he retorted as he slithered over to a barrier of fire in front of him, ‘I can also point out to you who bears the Dark Mark and who – DUCK!’

They both dived to the ground as a green light flew over their heads, missing their scalps by mere inches. Harry turned his gaze swiftly to the point the curse came from and sprang to his feet. ‘Protego Maxima!’ He hollered, a blue shield surrounding them.

A group composed of five masked Death Eaters trudged over, their robes torn and gashes on their pale faces, grinning maliciously at them as if Christmas had come early. ‘Expugno! Sectumsempra!’

‘Stupefy!’ Harry hit his mark and a Death Eater dropped to the floor unconscious. He took a step backwards, bumping into Neville. He cast a sideways glance. ‘One of them has the Mark.’

Neville nodded, not taking his eyes away from the Death Eaters that now circled around them. ‘Reducto! Stupefy!’

Harry clenched and unclenched his fingers as he gave them a calculating look. He flung his wand over his head, and waved it like a

lasso as his shield blocked another curse. 'Aestus Obex!' He shot his arm forward, blue fire sprouting from his wand, sizzling, blossoming into a semi-transparent barrier around the Death Eaters, blocking their way in every direction.

'Gibbon! What -?'

'Stupefy! Stupefy! Stupefy!' Neville yelled as three beams of red light landing squarely on their chests.

'Nice shot, mate,' said Harry, grinning at Neville. 'Let's go and snap their wands.'

They tottered over the unconscious Death Eaters, deftly cracking their weapons in two, leaving the fragments scattered around. Harry dropped the barrier, the blue flames vanishing. 'We should do something about the bodies. Don't want other Death Eaters to revive them.'

'Transfigure them into a rock or something,' Neville suggested; his back to Harry as he inspected the area for other possible threats.

Harry liked the idea of that. When he was done, he gestured Neville with his head and they both walked forward grimly.

They were at the end of Knockturn Alley, which was mostly deserted, except for the piled, unmoving bodies. Ahead of them, beyond a wall of fire, they could hear the shouts and cries of battle.

They stared at the cyclone of blaze for the longest of times, spellbound by it and unsure of what to do against it. There wasn't any spell Harry knew of that would put out such a huge fire, so he

decided to try out an unorthodox method.

Harry raised his hands in front of the fire and clasped them together. With utter concentration, he closed his eyes and poured his magic into the nonexistent gap between his palms. He could feel the power growing and crackling between them, begging to be released yet gluing his hands together forcibly, as if attracted by a magnetic force. With all the strength he could muster, he tautened the wiry muscles in his arms and focused on separating them. A sliver of air leaked in and sparks shot out from the small, expanding space.

Neville watched, amazed, as the fire parted in two for them, allowing a small opening for them to pass.

With a final tug, Harry detached his hands and the wall breached wide open, the sounds becoming louder and more deafening than before, like the background music of an infernal orchestra.

‘Follow me,’ he commanded, keeping his hands a foot away from each other, wincing at the strenuous task.

With a hasty jump, they both run through the creak, flinging themselves onto the ground. Harry released the hold he had on the barrier and gasped in relief.

Harry scrunched his nose at the sudden input of the coppery scent of blood and lifted his head inconspicuously, as if he pretended to be dead. The pit in his stomach grew at the sight in front of him.

Feeling fled as his whole body became numb. His mind tried to no avail to come up with an explanation to the devastation around, the wreckage in front of him. Barely a feet away, resting on its side, he recognised the body of Floean Fortescue. His eyes were glassy and filled with pain, fixed on Harry, pleading, as caked blood trailed down his half-open mouth in silent horror.

Harry tore his eyes away from him, his heart thumping against his chest and lifted his head. It was like walking inside an infernal music chamber, with pitch-black blocks of volcanic stone, hissing melodically like an old cello as torrents of white-hot felsic lava coated them, creating the fundamental harmonics, the background music to the symphony, clashing melodiously with each sparkle of crackling. The orchestra were the people; horned, crimson demons with hell in their eyes who seemed to play away furiously without a Hofkapellmeister to guide them; who played to their hearts' desire until the cords of their instruments sprang apart, their once formidable instruments turned into victims screeched deplorably. It was a true, heart-breaking, blood-curling Feuerschine Sonate.

Around him, on the cobbled and overrun lane was a cemetery of unburied and unsung bodies. Gringott's was no longer made of gleaming white marble, a golden plate hanging from the roof. The domes that flanked the entrance were cracked and burnt. The walls were blackened, with smudges of soot and human remains splattered across them. The plate was hanging precariously, threatening to crash down onto the ground. Goblins were fighting at the entrance, hampered by their own, deceased kin. A cluster of wizards attacked them mercilessly, and even though the goblins fought back ferociously, one by one, they all fell down.

To the right, Madam Malkin's shop had been burnt down; piles of ashes and dust were the only remnants of it. Flourish & Blott's was surrounded by fire, and Harry nearly threw up when he realised that there was light behind the sooty and blacked window panes, when he saw that there were four people screaming inside to get out. The Death Eaters that circled the house howled with cruel, sadistic laughter and some Renegades tried to fight against them and extinguish the fire.

The stationery shop, Quidditch Supplies, Eeyloops Owl Emporium, Gambol and Japes... Nothing left, only heaps of broken tiles,

shattered glass, cracked wood, shattered and charred pieces of merchandise and the stench of slaughter. The only shop standing was Ollivander's.

All around them, a bloody battle was taking place. Patterns of colourful lights swirled around as cloaked figures danced to the grisly tune of impending death.

‘Why would they do this to Diagon Alley?’ Neville croaked next to him, his pain so palpable Harry could almost feel his friend's heart breaking inside of him. ‘Why would they destroy it?’

Harry couldn't muster an answer as his eyes glassed over the ruins of Diagon Alley. He pushed the happy memories away and tugged at Neville's sleeve. ‘Come on. We must fight and find Owl.’

Dexterously, they both jumped to their feet but had to duck again as the Death Eaters around them realised that they were not dead and sent a barrel of curses at them. Death Eaters and Renegades swarmed around them, striking each other with jets of magic.

Neville and Harry joined the fight speedily, side by side as Harry had ordered. The aspiring conductor had joined the orchestra.

‘Legato.’

They bent and jumped, twirled and spun around. Beams and standard curses flung from the tips their wands. Their bodies and sense slowly unravelling, slowly immersing themselves into the alluring symphony of the battle. They were fluid, connected, their aims true and their intentions were to paralyse, not to kill. Only once in a blue moon, the tune was accentuated by small yet dead effective crippling moves.

Harry bent his knees as he avoided a Cruciatus Curse and stuck out his left, deftly kicking a Death Eater in the gut while Neville slashed his wand through air, a fierce and predatory look in his eyes, blasting his opponent away.

More Renegades and Death Eaters flocked sinuously to where Harry and Neville were, near the gates of Gringott's. All the small battles around Diagon Alley forgotten. Lightning and thunder shooting from wands and sore throats darted across the British skies. The metallic scent of blood and the pungent stench of wounded flesh invaded their nostrils, but instead of putting them off, it only made them fight more aggressively, with more determination than before.

‘Toccata.’

Neville panted by his side as he took cover behind him to retrieve something from his robes before he rejoined the battle. Beads of sweat dripped from his hands as he clumsily opened up a box, the item he had been looking for. He took out a seed and clutched it tightly in his left hand, tossing away the box. He started whistling as he fended off another Death Eater nonverbally.

Gradually, in slow motion, a stem spurt from his balled fist and attached itself to the back of his neck, rooting downwards and around until it covered his back completely beneath his robes. Gashes and holes appeared at his side as a ropey, sturdy, murky green stem surfaced speedily, rising around his body like a deathly guardian. Razor-sharp leaves blossomed from its cord-like sides, slashing anyone who got too close to them. Black flowers bloomed at the end of the tentacles, with burgeoning teeth that begged to gnaw at unsullied flesh, yawning like as if they had awakened from slumber.

Both Death Eaters and Renegades backed away from the sight of what they would call in the future the Green Doom. Their eyes were

consumed by the magnificent and terrifying sight of him, half a man, half a lethal plant.

‘Now.’ At once, the languid blossoms sprang vividly into action and bit all the Death Eaters they could find, their white, jagged teeth digging deep into their bodies, black venom dripping from the avid mouths, revelling in the sound of agonised screams as their pitiful mass of prey fell limply to the floor, not dead, but in such a deep slumber it would take the most expert of Potions Masters to revive them.

Harry smirked under his hood, half-awed, half-proud. He raised a hand as he twisted out of the way of an Entrail-Expelling curse. He coiled his wrist and gritted his fingers together before he opened his hand wide, a ball of arsenic grey discharged from his palm, hitting evenly on a Death Eater’s chest, flinging him and five others across the street.

Unwillingly, he began to edge away from Neville, being surrounded by Death Eaters. He rolled into a dive to avoid a Killing Curse and sighed in relief when it hit another Death Eater. He swished his wand, he twirled his hands; blasting, rendering unconscious, slashing, paralysing.

He let his senses unwind and take control over his actions. The queue of Death Eaters seemed endless, but he never faltered, never wavered. His insides were crackling and boiling with the heat of the battle. One by one, like with Neville, they succumbed to him.

Unwittingly, as his magic unravelled around him and his outline became hazy. A dangerous and thin blur of black fog billowed perilously around his body. He jerked, startled, when he realised that he was no longer standing on the ground, but hovering a few inches above the ground. He smirked inwardly at the panic-stricken expressions of the Death Eaters, who didn’t know what they were

fighting, and allowed his body to soar.

He rose to the level of the top of the bank, at the level of the crest of the fire hurricane, feeling elated as he flew up above the battlefield. From there, wherever he sensed a Dark Mark, he spilled a barrel of hexes and curses, the skies suddenly aflame with the crimson, stupefying light that emanated from him. A small movement of a red robe at the corner of his vision caught his eye, but he was distracted by the rivulet of Avada Kedavras that were being shot at him. When he looked again, it had vanished.

He recognised Cho Chang below and it looked as if she was in trouble. Without the slightest hesitation, he blasted her opponent away. She looked up and grinned at him, winking at him conspiringly.

From his point of view, he could see the whole ghastly picture of the theatre of war. Slowly, very slowly, the numbers of Death Eaters were dwindling, some brought down by the Renegades, some fleeing the site. Harry surveyed the arena of Diagon Alley, looking for the bigger threats. His heart thumped madly in his chest when he saw a grey robed man entering Gringott's. An abrupt realisation dawned upon him and he lowered himself to the ground quickly to rejoin the battle.

‘Staccato.’

‘GRYFFINDOR!’

Harry spun around as he landed and jumped up, startled. He gasped when he saw the face of a Death Eater merely inches away from him, a dagger in his hand. He wasn't fast enough to react, but Neville was. Recklessly, Neville jumped in front of him, taking the full impact of the silver dagger into his shoulder.

The Death Eater was about to pounce on him again when the flesh of

his throat parted sickeningly. Harry's eyes darted forwards and he recognised the flustered face of Owl, her body still arched and ready to shoot another weapon.

‘Adagio.’

The vines around Neville withered and dropped flaccidly to the tainted pavement. Neville panted and screeched with excruciating pain as he fell to his knees. Harry knelt down to help him as he cast the strongest shield he could muster around them.

Harry summoned Neville's Portkey and placed it on top of his semiconscious friend's chest. ‘Activate!’ he hollered and sighed in relief when Neville disappeared. He gave himself a moment to let out a heavy breath, as guilt and self-blame washed over him. He hoped that Neville would be soon in Dumbledore's expert hands and Kreacher's diligent care.

‘Larghetto.’

He slewed over by Owl's side. Beads of sweat plastered her bushy hair to her face. A faint wound was on her cheek and her robes were in tatters, but other than that she seemed unharmed.

‘He'll be all right?’ She asked, ducking out of the way of a Cruciatus Curse. ‘Avada Kedavra! Sodding Death Eaters...’

‘Aestus Obex! Yes, he'll be OK. Hielo! Stupefy! Stupefy! Oh blast it, will they never cease attacking?’ he growled, raising broken pebbles from the floor and hurling them towards the Death Eaters' heads. ‘Muffliato!’ he cried hastily, sighing in relief as they got a moment of privacy. ‘Listen, we need to get into Gringott's -’

‘What? Why? Ares is around! This is our chance -’

‘Leave Ares! There’s a Horcrux in Gringott’s – we must get it!’ He pleaded. He released a breath he didn’t know he had been holding when Owl nodded. ‘Quickly, grab my arm.’ She obliged and Harry drew a pinch of black soot from his pocket. He dropped it to the floor and watched for a fleeting instant as darkness surrounded and blinded them. Hastily, he flamed away.

He appeared with Owl at the entrance of Gringott’s. He was not surprised to find the set of white steps that led to the pair of burnished bronze doors blown down to rubble and debris, nor was he shocked at the sight of the red-and-gold uniformed guard goblin laying dead at their feet. He produced his Invisibility Cloak and covered them both, wincing lightly as Owl coughed.

‘You all right?’ he asked concernedly. ‘Oh blimey, did I hurt you when I flamed? Is the wound on your cheek the worst or -?’

Owl raised a hand in front of him to stop his ramblings. She gulped and nodded. ‘I’m fine. What was that? Why couldn’t I see a thing?’

‘The powder? Oh, that was a nifty product I bought, back in my old Diagon Alley. Instant Darkness Peruvian Powder. It’s damn handy.’ He skirted through the ruins of the wrecked gates, as stealthily as he could, his wand producing a small, dim, light to clear his path through the main hall.

‘Pianissimo.’

The main hall was vast and made of gleaming white marble. But instead of the customary and rigorous supervision of another line of goblins flanking the entrance and the vast amount of goblins sitting behind counters, it was all empty save for the occasional still body.

A pool of blood was coiling itself in the middle of the hall. Harry searched for the source of it and recoiled in revulsion when he saw the torn body of a goblin impaled by the chandelier.

‘Gringott’s had to be their target,’ murmured Owl. ‘They wanted to seize the bank. Take it from the goblins once and for all.’ She lifted her wand-arm, illuminating the tainted ceiling.

Harry frowned as they walked towards one of the many doors behind counters that led to the vaults. ‘Perhaps, but it was mainly a distraction. They wanted to keep us off the Riddle House.’

Owl turned her head sharply to Harry, effectively freezing him in his tracks. ‘Are you sure of that?’

Harry sighed, defeated, as he opened the door behind a counter, his eardrums protesting as it creaked on its hinges. ‘Positive. Neville and I went to the Gaunt Shack to retrieve another Horcrux, but it was missing. After that, I realised the Riddle House was off the map, protected by a Fidelius. That was what we were supposed to be attacking today, right?’

Owl nodded glumly. She sped through the door and narrowed her eyes. The sloppy passage that led to the vaults was dimly lit and eerie, the only source of light coming from flaming torches on the walls, a true testament of the goblins’ unfathomable and stingy behaviours. ‘You know what this means, right?’

‘Yeah, I know. There is a spy among the Renegades,’ he said

sullenly as he nearly tripped over a pile of cluttered rocks at his feet. 'We shouldn't take a cart. If there are any Death Eaters here it would draw unwanted attention upon us. Plus, I think that only goblins can ride those.'

'You are right. We also have to look out for the Thief's Downfall alarm. If we get caught, we are goners. What do you propose?' she asked, as she inspected critically one of the carts, keeping her hands away from it at a safe distance.

'Wrap your arms around me and don't let go. We'll flame to the Lestranges' vault. I'll hold the Cloak. You are good enough to flame, right?' he inquired, looking for any other wounds that she might have.

'I'm fine,' she said, almost defensively. She drew out her arms and did as she was told, pressing her body tightly to Harry's. With a feeble flinch, she readied herself to travel. Harry prayed that the layers of heavy protections in Gringott's would not prevent them from flaming inside.

'Allegro.'

Milliseconds later, they arrived inside of the wanted vault. Harry pulled a stupendous effort to stay hovering above the piles of cursed goods, sweat starting to tickle down his forehead. It was a thorny task to fly, hold the weight on a fully-grown woman with one arm and use his wand to lit the chamber, after all. Owl clung onto him with a strength he didn't know she possessed, whimpering mutely on his robes. Nostalgically, Harry was reminded f Hermione and her fear of heights. It looked as if Owl was the same.

Harry nearly dropped her when his ears were blasted by the booming

roar of a Dragon. He cursed himself silently. Perhaps he couldn't have possibly guessed that the creature would be able to sense an intruder inside its assigned vault, but they were now sure to get caught.

He looked down at Owl and saw that she was paralysed with fear, her face taut and deathly pale. To lighten the mood, while he lit up the ceiling, looking for the Horcrux, he joked, 'You know, that dragon outside? You, Ron and I flew on its back when we escaped Gringott's last year,' he said lightly.

Harry gripped her waist tightly, keeping her firmly attached to him. He soared horizontally over the ceiling and couldn't help a grin when he spotted the Horcrux. Hastily, his fingers clenched around the cold handle of the Hufflepuff Cup. It seemed that, even though he had failed to retrieve the ring, he had got hold of the most complicated and difficult Horcruxes-

Suddenly, the building shook and an ear-splitting shriek rang through the entire bank. The dragon outside thumped and roared at the door viciously, making the whole chamber shake. Harry couldn't help it, he lost his focus. They both landed on the heaps of jinxed freight, yelping as the scalding coins burnt their robes and flesh. The dragon outside pounded on the gate mercilessly as they screamed, sensing them as unwanted infiltrators that disturbed its inhumane peace.

'We need to move! Quick!' Harry ignored the welts forming all over his body as he hurled a burlesque piece of art away and grabbed her arm to flame away before it was too late for them.

Without a second's consideration, Harry flamed to the first destination that popped inside his mind: the main hall, the quickest and only exist he knew. Considering the stale and acrid stench that came from their bodies, his guess was that they were badly burnt and that a Cruciatus would be considered merciful as opposed to

flaming in their current state. They appeared with an unceremonious thud right on the threshold the door they had gone through before, the one that led them to the carts. Harry rose to his feet quickly, securing the Horcrux inside his robes.

Ahead of them were the burnished bronze gates, but above them, Harry realised with a hole in his stomach, was a steadily cracking ceiling. The only thing holding it together were thin planks of wood that seemed to be slowly succumbing to the weight of the roofs. The stained chandelier was swaying to nonexistent winds precariously, the corpse of the goblin lay sprawled on the marble floors, forgotten, like an out-of-fashion, ragged doll.

With a sickening jolt in his stomach, Harry realised that they were not alone. The main hall was quickly swarming by Death Eaters in identical black robes and white masks; raucous, boisterous as always. Flanking them commandingly, were four people in different coloured robes: crimson; shiny, pitch-black; bottle green; deep grey. One, Three, Four, Five. Artemis, Aphrodite, Ares and Apollo.

‘Sotto voce.’

Holding his breath, he pressed himself against the wall behind the door, not daring to even wince and the jagged rocks cut on his body.

‘We are not going to make it through here,’ Owl stated in a barely inaudible voice, panic and fear leaking freely from her tone. ‘To even try is suicide. We need to find another exit. We are lucky we haven’t been spotted.’ She gambled a glance in the main hall’s direction then pushed herself onto the wall with such a force, Harry was afraid she would walk right through it. ‘Listen,’ she whispered, her usual confidence returning somewhat to her voice, ‘if – if I go there and distract them, you will have a chance to flee -’

Harry swivelled his head sharply to her, his eyes blazing. 'I'm not leaving you,' he growled as low as possible, gripping her hand tightly between his.

Owl closed her eyes momentarily. When she opened them, tears were tugging at the corners of her eyes. 'There are four Unnameables out there. The odds of us both getting out of here alive are pretty slim. You are much more valuable than I am,' she choked, pain etched on her face. 'You must live through this. I'm expendable -'

'Shut up,' he interjected angrily. 'I won't leave a friend behind.' He considered the matter closed and ignored the faint, muted sobs coming from Owl. He prayed to whatever was out there that they weren't caught. He hoped dearly that the loud noises from the Death Eaters in the hall would muffle their own sounds. He wished that he ceiling would just crack and fall on them.

Flaming away was out of the question, he couldn't even summon the phoenix inside him to flee, so scalded he was. He didn't think that running as fast as their feet could carry them was a good idea; it would most definitely give them away. Waiting, lurking in the shadows, hoping that the Death Eaters would exit the bank quickly looked like the only option they had at the moment.

'SILENCE!' thundered a cold, female voice in the hall, making Harry and Owl jolt. 'Someone has infiltrated the bank,' the voice continued, its cool and composed tone sending shivers down Harry's spine. 'I would hazard a guess at a rogue Renegade trying to get hold on some money – but we cannot allow them to wander down to the old vaults.' Harry and Owl shared an alarmed look, both trying to mentally de-numb their limbs to run as fast as they could. 'Divide into four groups of fifty, and one of us will accompany each of you.' There was a loud shuffle of speedy feet across the hall. 'Ares, you go West.

Apollo, you go East. Aphrodite – South.'

Harry and Owl shared another hasty, panicky look, talking silently, as the buzz of twenty-one pairs of feet approached their hiding place. Without a second thought, Harry whispered, 'Run!'

'Prestissimo.'

Hands clasped together, they darted through the obscure, winding corridors, speeding up when they heard an excited 'Someone's there!' They bolted through the zig-zagging path, not falling to the deep abyss by a scratch, their wands barely illuminating the way their feet ran through. They had to run as they ducked constantly for the Death Eaters that were hot in their pursuit would not stop hurling hexes at them in the distance. It was lucky, perhaps, that the average wizard was so inadequate when it came to physical exercise, as they relied too much on magical means to brew up solutions, for it seemed that Harry and Owl were spreading the distance between them.

Anxiously, Harry slashed his hand at the wall, blasting a hole through it and dragged Owl inside as the rocks caved in, protecting them for a while.

'You all right?' she gurgled, placing a hand on her complaining chest.

'I'm fine,' he panted, bowing forwards and placing his sweaty palms on his slightly bent knees, still holding his wand alight. 'We don't have much time, we must start running again,' he added, as the sound of steps drew closer and closer.

Owl nodded shakily and took his hand as they darted forwards

through a dark, rocky tunnel, narrowly avoiding getting chopped but not immune to getting harshly scraped by the pointy end of the abnormally massive crystal quartz six-sided prisms that ended in six spiky pyramids. 'I have no idea how to get out of here.'

The never-ending tunnels were moist and damp, gleaming eerily in the darkness because of the quartz formations. Moss surfaced through the small cracks in the stones, droplets of water trickling down them until they fell, turning the path below slippery and dangerous.

A distant boom reached their ears, signalling that the Death Eaters had penetrated the tunnels. Without sparing a moment, they hastened themselves as they darted through the dark corridors, Owl providing the light and Harry blasting rocks and thin walls.

The air became steadily staler and poorer, lacking oxygen to breathe. Their lungs screeched inside their chests, they both felt about to collapse. Without a second thought, Harry turned to his left and sent another detonating jet through the rocky barrier.

Light, faint-orange light penetrated through the circular crack as a breeze of breathable air invaded their lungs. So sweet, so pure it was it nearly made them choke. They jumped over the sharp rubble and quartz, landing harmfully on the white floor, their ribs and knees hitting the white marble with a nauseating crunch.

Panting heavily, his whole body screaming in protest, Harry forced himself to his feet, heaving Owl's weight up. They both leaned on each other as Harry tried to draw out his magic to close the breach. He was so tired, so exhausted, so drained that it took him ten precious seconds to get it right.

Satisfied with the result, he sent a surveying glance around, trying to determine where they were and how could they escaped the bank. He tried once again to summon the phoenix inside him – torture de

damned, they needed to escape – but to no avail. His ability to flame out was completely blocked.

The room they were in was a tall, vast and bare rib vault. Even though there were no riches or furniture in the ample space it provided, it made up for it in elaborated and exquisite carvings into the walls and ceiling. Gilded sculptures of strangely good-looking goblins adorned them, like a mosaic that depicted the entire History of the Goblin race. They were represented with unearthly amounts of gold; with wizards supplicating at their feet while they ruled, triumphant. At each intersecting column, a silver, long-nailed and knuckly hand held a flaming wand.

The whole vault reeked of ancient and foreign protective magic, which Harry could not understand. It was older than time and so strange Harry doubted its origin was even human. As a wave of thundering steps approached, he dragged himself and concentrated on breaking the walls apart.

‘Quick, Gryffindor,’ Owl pressed on, stealing anxious glances at the place where the Death Eaters would come from.

Harry sent her an annoyed look. ‘I’m trying. I’m not all mighty, you know?’ he snapped, their current predicament, his frazzled nerves and lethal doses of adrenaline that cursed through his body making him rather short-tempered. He focused on the walls, placing his now flaming wands on it and sent the strongest spurge on magic he could rally.

The steps got closer and closer, as the voices that accompanied them clearer and clearer. But he couldn’t get through the wall. He had tried everything he knew, but to no avail. Nothing worked, not even when he sent a blast of magic so powerful it made him fly thirty feet backwards. It seemed that the only weak spot in the entire vault was where they had come through. Frustration and angst crept up

him, like an unstoppable tumour, born from the pit of his stomach and finding its residence near his heart, oppressing him.

‘Harry,’ Owl said softly, taking his hand in his with utmost care and affection. Harry wheeled around to look at her, tense to the death, and was shocked to see her with an almost placid and serene expression. ‘Harry – leave it. Don’t waste the little strength you have left on this. It’s useless anyway – yes it is,’ she added peacefully, intertwining her welted fingers with his. Her eyes darted around his face, devouring his features hungrily, as if she had never seen anything as good as him. ‘We must fight, so let’s rest until they come,’ she said softly, squeezing his hand lightly, tears running freely down her cheeks.

Harry remained silent for a few moments, looking at Owl as if he had never seen her before, admiring her limitless courage and determination. She was Hermione, but she was also Owl. She had the same valour, the same glint in her eyes, the same brilliance and her face. But when he saw her, he didn’t see his best friend, he saw a person who cared deeply for him, who fought to the death for him and who was determined to give up her life for him. Slowly, he jerked his head in a nod. She gave him a sad smile and tugged on his hand, making his knees buckle. With a small chuckle, she kissed him tenderly on the forehead, her tears moistening his face.

Silently, hands still clasped together, they drew back into the shadiest part of the vault, casting Disillusionment Charms on themselves, trying to regain a bit of their strength and making amends with themselves, relinquishing their heartbeats, coming to terms with what they were about to face. They never uttered a word, they didn’t even exchange a meagre look. They only stared ahead in trepidation, waiting for the small army of Death Eaters to come find them, with the occasional squeeze of hand to reassure them, to remind each other that they were not alone, that they were in this together.

Harry stared at the spot of the wall where the Death Eaters would appear with his jaws set in grim determination, his eyes dry. Whatever happened, would happen. He had already faced death and knew what it felt like; he had nothing to fear of it. He had already jumped head-first into it, fully aware of his decision to sacrifice himself. He was not afraid. His only regret was that he would not be able to get to know his father, mother and brother, no chance to rekindle his bond with Sirius or tell Remus that he was a father of a beautiful baby boy. He would not see Voldemort vanquished and live a happy, long life with those he loved. But he was not afraid. Dumbledore was still there to complete the Horcrux-hunt quest, and if anyone could defeat Voldemort apart from himself – prophecy or no prophecy – that was Dumbledore.

BOOM.

Like a plague, two by two, the Death Eaters filtered inside the vault, poised, bragging and wands at the ready. Some were as immaculate as if they had not fought at all. Others had lost their masks and had deep, bloody gashes on their faces. They gathered in a big circle in the centre of the rib vault, their eyes fixed expectantly at the gap in the wall.

Gracefully and unfazed, a tall figure in a grey cloak appeared, his pale hands caressing the rocks delicately as he waltzed inside the chamber, his steps controlled and composed. The Death Eaters shut up at once and gazed at him like a deity worthy of the most sacrificial worship.

He raised his arm; a dark wand that seemed oddly familiar to Harry in his hand. His grey robe hid his face, but his voice was clear and commanding. 'We seemed to have hit a dead end. Inspect this vault carefully to search for any leads on where those two thieves might have escaped through,' he drawled smoothly.

Harry's heart skipped a beat. He recognised that voice, and he

recognised the wand too. But it couldn't –

‘Forgive me, sir,’ a sturdy Death Eater inputted, his scraggly beard and beastly features hinting that he was a werewolf. ‘But they are still here. I can smell them.’

Another Death Eater made a mocking woofing sound but was immediately silenced by a small Cruciatus Curse coming from Apollo. ‘Oh really? Could you point them to me, Gnarledpaw?’

The werewolf, Gnarledpaw, cricked his neck and cracked his scarred knuckles as he sniffed the air intentionally. This time, no jeering sounds came from the rest of the Death Eaters.

Gnarledpaw raised his clawed hand slowly, carefully drawing out his index finger. His hand hesitated a bit until it stopped, pointing directly at where Harry and Owl where. ‘There. They must be invisible.’

With one last squeeze of hands, still firmly clasped together, they dropped their Disillusionment Charms.

Hell broke loose.

‘Fugue.’

Volleys of dark curses exploded in the chamber, corrosive beams impacting on the exquisite walls, gnawing at the carved sculptures, sizzling chunks falling loudly to the floors.

Harry and Owl fought as hard as they could, twisting and turning synchronically, as if they were mentally connected. Dancing a ballet of deathly lights with prodigious grace, sending their own counter-attacks, hurling at them their own lethal curses. Harry didn't hold back this time, he let his aggression and love for life to unravel

and rise.

But it was not enough. They were outnumbered: fifty-one against two, no matter how good they were, was no fair match. Harry fought like a beast: still powerful, still deadly – but trapped. He didn't care; he fought with tooth and nail against anyone who defied them.

Seas of black robes attacked them mercilessly, drawing blood out of them, slowly weakening them and steadily backing them against the wall. But it was not until Apollo approached him flung a hex of his own that Harry faltered. He buckled over when a Severing Hex sliced his knee open, dragging Owl to the floor with him.

He sprang them to their feet as he ignored the excruciatingly pain that came from his bleeding knee. But the damage was done; his reflexes were slower, painstakingly slower, helping the Death Eaters to curse them faster and more accurately than before.

Owl screamed as a Flesh-Eating Curse grazed her arm. She lost control of it and her wand pointed upwards. A spurt of sick, watery green shot up at the ceiling.

It was as if the air had frozen, nobody moved for a moment, one hundred and six eyes staring at the ceiling in consternation. As if captured by a film of pictures, the ceiling began to hum and rumble for its cavern-like depths, stirring, awakening from slumber.

It happened too quickly for Harry to register his actions. He grabbed Owl's hand and hurled himself to the floor as the ceiling finally cracked and caved in, heavy pieces of rock and metal falling on the helpless Death Eaters, unable to save themselves.

Harry scrunched his eyes close and ignored the agonising screams coming from the impaled Death Eaters. He hugged Owl tightly, burying his face in the crook of her neck, waiting for the shrieks to pass, waiting for the blood to finish being spilled.

‘Gryffindor, it’s okay,’ she crooned. ‘It’s over.’

Harry opened his eyes to see a smiling and crying Owl on top of him and he let out a breath he didn’t know he had been holding. He turned his head to the left and let out a yelp as his nose grazed the jagged ends of the rocks.

He wriggled, exhaustion finally taking over him – until he realised that he had landed on something soft instead of the hard marble – something alive.

‘Owl – there is someone underneath,’ he whispered.

‘I know,’ she said, her position allowing her to see the body under his. ‘It’s Apollo – or should I say,’ she paused for a slightly dramatic effect ‘- an old classmate long thought to be dead: Draco Malfoy.’

Harry gasped, even though he had guessed it when he heard him talking. He tried to squiggle to get a look at Malfoy, but he was unable to move. They were effectively trapped, barely an inch of space to move around. He was also squished between Owl and Malfoy, which didn’t make things any easier.

‘Can you move?’ Harry asked, his eyes running over Owl’s face, trying to look for any injuries.

Owl winced. ‘I can’t. My right side, waist to foot, my bones are all shattered.’

Harry nodded and wrapped her arms around her middle back delicately, trying not to hurt her. With one last effort, he called forth

his magic and began hovering horizontally with her on top until they reached a healthy height, towering over the small mountain of debris and blood. He slung her delicately over his back, with extreme care. He soared upwards, crossing the circular crack in the ceiling. He deposited her in the dark cavern above, similar to the tunnels they had sped through, her feet dangling from the breach.

He crouched by her side. 'Let me have a look at you.' Slowly and apologetically he inspected the damage. Her right side was a downright mess. Blood oozed freely with each of her heart beats, pouring out through her torn muscles and broken bones. She closed her eyes and held back any protest stoically.

'Episkey! Episkey! Episkey!' the cavern flickered alight with each of his healing spells. The mutilated leg was slowly mending itself, small growls coming from Owl. Sinews and muscles were sewn together and bones were re-attached. Panting, he said 'well, that's all I can do. You'll have to spend some time in bed to heal completely. I can't do anything about the loss of blood,' he smiled contritely, 'all of my healing potions have shattered.'

Owl opened an eye and smiled at him. 'It's all right. You have done more than enough.' She winked at him mischievously. 'You should have a look at yourself. Your face is a bloody mess.' She laughed as he touched his cheek and scrunched his nose in distaste as clotted and sticky blood appeared on his hand.

They fell into silence and stared down at the wreckage below them. Half of the chamber had been caved in, a pile of at least twenty feet of black stone sprawled. Harry's eyes darted to the corner where they had been and he found the pale and sharp face of Draco Malfoy. He didn't know if he was dead or alive. 'What do we do with him?' he said, pointing at Malfoy's unmoving body.

Owl looked pensive for a moment, her eyes narrowing under the

wisps of matted, bushy hair. 'Leave him. If he's dead that is good news for us. But if he isn't – well, it's best to flee as soon as possible. There are still three other parties looking for us, and we cannot count on another ceiling miraculously crumbling on top of them.' She sighed and tried to move her leg, wincing slightly. 'You know, I thought we were both goners back there.'

Harry let out a mirthless laugh. 'Yeah, I did too. It was bloody daunting.' He patted his breast-pocket and beamed at Owl. 'We got the Horcrux and made it out alive.'

Owl grinned at him. 'Come on, let's move. We need to get out of here. I think I can walk – with a little help, that is.'

Harry stood up and slung Owl's arm over his shoulders, holding her wrist as his other arm slithered around her waist. With her leaning heavily on his side, they trotted through the shimmering tunnel. There was no need for a wand, if they walked slowly – which they did, considering Owl's bad state – they could walk safely enough in the semi-darkness. There was also the fact that Harry's hands were occupied supporting Owl and that she wasn't fit to even hold a matchstick.

They fell into silence, the only sound coming from their swaying steps and the faint, muffled noises of when small droplets dripped from above. Their breaths were ragged and somewhat screechy, but they moved forward nonetheless, climbing the slightly steep path.

'The air isn't as poor anymore,' Harry commented after half an hour of silence, 'perhaps we are close to the roof of the bank.'

Owl merely grunted. She didn't have the energy to reply. She was solely focused on dragging her feet forward up the meandering way.

They became quiet again. Both were in a state of semi-alert,

semi-unconsciousness, jumping from slumber to vigil. They skirted around the sharp edges of the quartz prisms, numb and exhausted, but still looking out for any sound of people around. They half-crawled, half-waddled their feet along the never-ending winding tunnel. Their pace was slow and clumsily, both on the brink on collapsing, more Owl than Harry.

Harry's watch beeped inaudibly, the screen showing it was nine at night. Harry blinked. He estimated that he had been fighting for about thirteen hours without a drop of water or a bite. As if his body had read his thoughts, his stomach gave a loud growl and his mouth felt dry and sticky.

And then, it happened.

Hurried and excited voices scurried over their heads. Panic rose inside their chests as a cold, female voice broke the silence. 'They are right below, dig a hole and finish them off. Fifty against two should not be that complicated for you. I must find Apollo, his team has gone off the radar.'

Bile rose up their throats, feeling unable to fight another horde of bloodthirsty Death Eaters, in the company of an Unmentionable or not. They stood frozen on their spot, their eyes fixed on the steadily crumbling ceiling, small wisps of light penetrating the darkness.

There was nothing they could do. They were beyond exhausted and weak. Death seemed like a merciful release to them. There was no option, no possibility to escape this time. They had been extremely lucky before, but luck runs over in the end, even in the possession of a vial of Felix Felicis.

They stared at each other sadly. They didn't deserve this – not after all they had gone through that night, not after the epic tale they had lived, after all the pain and blood and dances with death. But there was nothing they could do. The ceiling wouldn't crumble on the

Death Eaters again, nor would they just drop dead on their tracks at the sight of them.

Harry resigned himself to their fate, clutching Owl tightly to him. 'We nearly made it,' he said sullenly.

'We nearly did,' Owl agreed, sadly, glowering at the steadily cracking ceiling, as if wishing she could kill them with her glare.

He sighed and waited. He would fight –

His eyes nearly burst out of his sockets as inspiration struck him. He swivelled to face Owl, his voice alight with excitement. 'Listen, I have a way for us to get out for here,' his eyes darted over her hopeful face, 'But you have to trust me completely and do as I say.'

Owl agreed readily. 'Excellent,' said Harry, almost merrily, thinking only about their survival and not the price his soul would pay. 'Step back quickly and make yourself invisible. Climb atop me as soon as I'm done,' he traipsed through his words.

He cocked his head to a side and asked her softly. 'Do you trust me?'

Owl gave him a bewildered look. 'With my life.'

Harry gave her a small smile. 'Then close your eyes. Don't open them.'

She arched an eyebrow at him but obeyed his orders nonetheless. Harry inhaled deeply and pushed away the sounds above him, concentrating inwardly. He closed his eyes and called forth the slippery, slithering part inside of him. Slowly, the power grew inside his chest and he felt himself dwarfing briefly, his legs and arms vanishing, before he expanded and grew broadly. His neck became thicker than his trunk; his head grew to the size of a gigantic boulder.

His muscles and bones elongated at an unearthly speed. Then, his facial bones shifted and remodelled themselves as his newly flat tongue forked in two.

He hissed in the darkness, uncomfortable at the tight, claustrophobic space her was trapped in. He felt excitement coursing through his body as the faint sound of fifty beating hearts above filled his ears, the sweet scent of blood ensnaring his senses.

He nearly thrashed as he felt something climbing up on his body. He realised that it had been so long since he had transformed into the animal that he did not have complete and absolute control over the mind's beast from the start. He calmed it telling the other half of his brain "Youngling. No food. Too skinny," over and over again. He applauded Owl's brilliance when she cast a Sticking Charm on her legs and hands, adhering her body to the back on his neck. When he felt her face buried on his scaly neck, he tautened his powerful muscles, ready to strike.

He didn't care about the guilt he would feel after at the slaughter of fifty people. Fiercely, he thought that if it saved Owl, it would all be worth it.

Without another second, he narrowed his bulbous eyes and shot upwards, his fangs poised.

The ceiling exploded as he burst through it, sending Death Eaters flying in all directions. The orange light coming from another rib vault cast a shimmering light on his imposing body.

'Merlin! It's a Basilisk!' a Death Eater cried.

Harry sixty-feet of a deadly snake spun to face the speaker and glared at him, and the one next to him – and then some more. The basilisk coiled in ecstasy at the prospect of some many tasty pieces

of prey. With sadistic pleasure, they each seized up and collapsed, undoubtedly dead. He opened his mouth, his fangs bursting with venom and attacked at the panicky Death Eaters, gnawing at their arms and trunks.

One by one, even the one who tried to flee, they all fell. Fifty of them, dead by his stare or by his fangs. He heard the elated cry coming from Owl from the back of his head and he thought that perhaps, for the first time in her life, Hermione was enjoying heights. Elated, they both circled around the victory ground, oblivious to anything but the relief of living to tell the tale. He spun and danced with an irrationally happy and already visible Owl attached to him, rejoicing that they were still alive and together.

So ecstatic he was he did not notice a pair of red eyes following his every move.

Feeling confident and reckless, he glanced above, calculating his chances. Could a flimsy ceiling of stone hold back a basilisk? To even consider that it could was so laughable he let out an amused hiss. He lowered his body before he pumped it upwards, his skull cracking the ceiling.

Fresh air invaded his nostrils. They were on the roof. They had made it. He hastily changed back into his human form and hugged Owl tightly, his eyes slightly moistened.

‘You did it! You bloody well damn did it!’ she cried blissfully, doing some sort of Irish gig on the roof. Even if she was injured, she didn’t care, she danced euphorically under the moonlight as Harry watched her happily, enjoying the breeze of fresh air that filled his lungs, allowing himself to relax for a bit before he worked out a way to get out of there.

Immersed as he was in his seventh heaven and in finding the

solution to the newly arisen problem, he did not notice a blur or noxious, black, shimmering smoke lurking in the corner, slowly taking the form of a small woman in crimson robes. He didn't notice the glinting, predatory red eyes stalking their moves and actions. He didn't notice that they were both at the edge of the roof, nor did he see the gleaming silver bow rising slowly as an arrow settled itself next to it, pointing straight at one of their midriffs, ready to be released.

The look of elation hadn't left Owl's face when the poisoned arrow penetrated her stomach. She swayed precariously over the border of the roof, like a puppet whose strings had just been cut. Still dancing under the moonlight and the bright stars she felt her midriff dampen. Surprised at the stabbing sensation, she lowered her eyes and gurgled when she saw the weapon protruding out of her bleeding body. She raised her head and looked at Harry, touching her leaking middle, getting her hand soaked in blood.

‘Harry...’

She staggered over the edge and lost her balance, plummeting to the grounds below.

‘NO!’ Harry screamed and he bolted and plunged from the roof somersaulting. He prayed the winds to carry him faster to catch Owl before she was crushed against the pavement. He wrung his limbs around, his hood falling, trying to reach Owl's outstretched hand.

Firmly, he clasped her hand in his and pulled her upwards, shifting her to carry her in his arms in a bridal fashion. Gently, he willed his magic to land them softly on the deserted, cobbled street.

He placed her on the ground gently and ripped off the cloth around her middle. Frantic, he waved a shaking hand to dispel the arrow

from her stomach.

Owl thrashed and screamed as the wooden weapon left her middle. She sent him a pleading look, asking him not to torture her any further. Harry's hands flew over the wound at an inhumane speed, shooting healing spells. She could feel the wound closing briefly with each spell only to burst open a second afterwards, making her scream in agony.

‘Harry... please...’

She could feel her organs dissolving, as if she had some sort of creature lurking inside trying to devour her. She lifted her head and glanced at the sickly green mound of poison pasted to her wound. She shifted her glassy eyes to Harry and grasped his hand with all the strength her faltering arm could gather.

‘Harry... please... let me – go...’ she panted, her lungs drenched in liquid.

He shook his head, tears trickling down his flushed cheeks. ‘I can’t,’ he moaned pitifully.

She squeezed his hand, reassuringly. ‘It’s going to be – all right.’ Her body thrashed as another throb of excruciating pain washed over her. She shut her eyelids close before opening and searching for Harry’s emerald eyes. She raised her free hand and placed it on his warm cheek. ‘Your friend – Hermione – she is coming... I can,’ she took a pause, as blood spilled over her mouth, ‘Feel her. She is close.’

‘I don’t care! You can’t die, Owl,’ he whispered, his voice breaking as he tussled against the flesh-eating wound on her middle. ‘You can’t fucking die! You can’t leave me!’

Owl lowered her hand, smiling almost serenely at Harry. 'Yes – I can.' She writhed as another wave of unbearable agony ran through every particle of her body. 'Heal my b-body later for her.' Her breathing became laboured, her strength quickly receding.

Harry placed a hand on her back, lifting her a few inches above the ground and pulled her into his lap, cradling and rocking her body as he wept quietly in her hair. 'Please... please...'

'Harry... look at me...' He turned his bloodshot eyes to hers, and she felt a stab of regret at leaving him. 'Don't mourn me... I chose my fate.' She tried to pour all the gratitude and pride she felt into her gaze. 'You did – well, soldier. Thank you –for everything.'

He shook his head desperately at her. She sent him one last, hungry and fierce look, one last look of friendship deeper and more profound than death. With the little strength she had left, she dragged her free arm to her chest and balled her fist, punching her ribs softly where her heart was. . 'Live by the sword... Die by the sword...'

Her eyelids fluttered, Harry's soul-wrenching sobs becoming hazy and distorted, his outline turning blurry. The pain wasn't receding, but her brain was suppressing it, consciousness slowly ebbing away as her mind started to shut down.

She opened her eyes wide and gasped, her back arched in pain, a silent scream on her lips, her legs writhing in one last moment of torture. She didn't protest, she accepted her death. She was a soldier.

She felt the rush of death approaching her and embraced it. Her body relaxed and slumped back down on Harry's arms as her eyelids closed and her arm fell limply from her chest, blackened blood still leaking from her body, morbidly staining the pavement.

Harry howled in agony into the night when he felt Owl's body flaccid and languid in his arms. 'No... it can't be... no...' His voice was hoarse as he promised any deities above he would give them his soul if he could have his friend back. He held her lifeless body close to his heart, wishing that hers would imitate his beat.

His face was soaked with the blood that oozed freely from Owl's parted lips. But he didn't care, the only thing that mattered was the shell of the person in his arms, the acute misery that constricted his heart, making think that he would feel better if it was entirely ripped off his chest.

He separated his face from her hair and slowly turned up, his eyes darting up gradually to the roof of Gringott's, his visage an unrecognisable mask of blood and tears.

Standing on the spot from where Owl had fallen stood a woman in crimson robes, the hems of it billowing faintly at her feet, her silver bow and black quiver slung over her shoulder. In slow motion, she drew out a pale hand that carried a very familiar ring and balled her fist, placing it above her heart and bowed to him, showing him her respect.

Hatred as her had never felt pumped through his body, his blood boiling and his ears roaring. Without giving it a second thought, without caring that he was about to break a promise he had made to himself many years ago; he lifted his wand, pouring through his veins the deathly loathing he felt for her.

‘Avada Kedavra!’

His heart was set and his aim was true, but she vanished before the Killing Curse hit her. The green light soared up and flared the skies like a shooting star before it faded.

Harry was left broken and alone, without the revenge he craved and with a dead friend dangling limply in his arms. He howled in grief like a man who last lost something precious, like a brother who had seen his sister die, like the conductor who lost his sense of hearing and could never ever again listen to the magnificent music he had dedicated his life to, like the blinded eagle who would never bask in the utter glory of a sunrise.

Dawn would eventually come, but that night, all Harry could see was darkness.

-oOoOoOoOo-

DISCLAIMER: Aye, was down at me mate's John pub having sum titchies with good ol' Bill Shakespeare, Jo Rowling and Ronnie Tolkien. I was taking too many swigs of me whisky, y'see, whereas the sly peeps were just having ho's. Sad, I go' too a-drunk and lost the rights for Harry Potter, Hamlet'n' The Lord of t'Rings ova a bad hand of poker.

-oOoOoOoOo-

A/N: It's done. Bloody hell. That took ages – eons even. Blimey, did I seriously plan to make the contents in chapters thirteen, fourteen and fifteen fit into just one chapter? I really do not know what I was thinking at the time.

Again, I'd like to apologise for the insane length and the mistakes. I considered splitting the chapter in two, but when I did – it just felt so wrong. So I had to put it back together. Rest assured, chapter sixteen will be nowhere as long as this one. Also, my beta's life is so hectic at the moment I'm amazed she has time to breathe; let alone eat, sleep, etc. So I'm posting it unbeta-read, because I didn't want you readers to put up with a three-month long wait.

If you haven't noticed it by now, I wrote the entire battle piece while listening to Wagner, Beethoven, Mozart, Händel, Karl Orf, Tchaikovsky, Stravinsky... I guess the result is pretty evident, heh heh.

So now you know that Draco Malfoy is indeed Apollo. Before any of you throw tomatoes at me screaming for bloody murder, please remember that canon Draco went to Hogwarts under Dumbledore's Light eye, whereas this Draco was influenced since he was twelve by a triumphant Voldemort; naturally, the differences would be staggering.

I also wanted to explore a darker side of Harry. In canon books, it looks as he despises the Avada Kedavra Curse (he will shoot a Crucio at a Death Eater because she spat at McGonagall but will fling an Expelliarmus at Voldemort), so I wanted to depict a scene in which it would be believable for Harry to cast the Killing Curse. Nerves frazzled after a long, torturous battle and having the dead body of a friend in his arms... Well, I thought it would be fitting. Opinions?

I hated killing Owl. When I planned this story two years ago, I had this scene in my mind fixed from the very start. But when I did the actual writing... Well, let's just say that I cried like an emotional tosser. Although that may have been because I was listening to Beethoven's Mondscheine Sonate at the time I was typing it out.

Oh, I wanted to say that this story, especially the first chapters, is going through major revision. The first bits make me want to hide away in shame. If you have any suggestions (i.e. stuff you'd rather see deleted, modified...), I'm very happy to listen to each and every single one of you.

In this chapter, I would like to thank CRF of HPFF, whose reviews always make me grin and laugh like an idiot.

Reviews make my day. Especially after having dedicated so much of my time on this chapter. Please review?

Until next time,

Vermouth

Member of the Siriusan Order

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